

The reader is warmly introduced to I Have Got Tickets to Heaven by the Disclaimer page revealing fiction as the book category. Yet, once one dares to navigate the whole collage of linking stories, the reader will arrive at the conclusion that there is more than fiction. The writer's longevity may reveal author's own experiences at play.

**I've Got Tickets to Heaven:
Just need to call for a limousine**

By JC de Melo

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I've Got
TICKETS
to
Heaven



Just need to call for a limousine

JC de Melo

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Disclaimer

This novel, like any other story, is a product of pure fiction. It has come to exist only to satisfy my desire to add value to the conversation of religion or non-religion, of heaven or of no existence of such place; and above all, of God's presence in our lives. Or any other type of divine creation that has been debated for centuries by all theological and philosophical minds. Well, ask Einstein.

Possessing no degrees or background in any of the essential credentials, my coming to the conversation is then for pure pedestrian or street conversation. Yes, we all talk about issues that, in spite of being under the domain of doctors of some kind, are fundamental to our existence and the right to believe. We are, after all, some sort of experts in one matter or another. Just being alive, observing well, does grant us the right to add to the argument.

There are many aspects, details of the stories and dialogues that may give the appearance of veracity or real-live experiences. They are not. With rare exceptions and in part with the exception of the Author's notes, they do not reflect real experiences of any kind. My imagination then was and is now at work.

Enjoy the ride!

JC de Melo

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Elvera

A conversation with God --- sequel

*"Heaven is filled with converted sinners of all kinds,
and there is room for more."
----- St. Joseph Cafasso*

Afterall we did not talk about the dream on Friday. Although we left Castro Valley early, early enough to be in our summer home before five, the traffic was horrible. We had only time to drop our stuff in the house and then find a place to eat. There was also no need to search for anything fancy. The usual hole-in-the-wall restaurant always served us well; the owners knew us and we were always satisfied eating there.

That said, we postponed the sharing and eventual deep discussion of the dream for Saturday. Or so we thought. It did not happen either for Walter had a list of small projects in our home in Monterey. It is just a sixteen hundred square foot home requiring less than five minutes of walking to reach the ocean. It has one large master bedroom, two small bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a

detached car garage. Although we could afford to make large and convenient improvements, like adding more space and modern stuff, we opted to stay put. Even now, because we never thought of having homes to look like museums and/or have state-of-the-art conveniences. The big cottage was good enough for us and for our three children and their brood whenever time permitted them to visit it. Kids, in many sports activities with games and tournaments on weekends, denied them the pleasures of the ocean and beach environments. For that reason and others, we never had there, the whole family together. Besides, we love our Bay Area, particularly on the East side with easy access to three major highways. We thought we were blessed with unique and old fashion neighborhoods, and were close to the best of the Bay. Indeed, we would brag to friends from other places that the Bay Area, with its diversity, was as unique as one group of seven million people could be. An expensive living for some, but a reliable area where reliability was entrusted to decent civic leaders.

Therefore, we let the Saturday be a Saturday -- relaxation without exploring some new cooking adventures. These types of cooking relaxation and joys were then relegated to more revolutionary ways of physical, mental and spiritual expeditions; such as walking on the beach and using the iconic trails. Walter was not an avid walker. He preferred long but leisure walking where he and I would feel free to air out all of our many thoughts and sometimes intimate emotions. Not guarded and polished, but just free riding exchanges. The past was not that much revisited. It was like the immediate past that included our recent decisions to modify our impact on careers, and the challenges that our children and now growing grandchildren were facing in their lives. These mattered. The status of the world where more bad news obliterated the news that

could earn the coveted prize that the *glass was half full* also mattered. Many times, we laughed that some of the bad news derived from decisions that we had not approved. The variables were so many that juxta-positioning them would cause civil wars.

On the cooking side, for certain, I was never known for being a gourmet chef or a pioneer in the nouveau culinary expeditions. Yet, my cooking never embarrassed me. I held my ground on typical family food on weekdays and expanded to weekend creative meals. Watching and learning from my mother-in-law, I could replicate her skill and cook great Basque food or food borrowed from the other regions -- like Paella from Galicia. And that was exactly what I cooked for the Saturday -- Paella Louisiana style. Walter even used to say in my early years watching and taking notes from my mother-in-law's old fashion and flavorful cooking that: *you honor my mother with your "from the old country's cuisine."* Indeed, I learned from her how to cook Paella, Octopus salad, or served whole with the body and the tentacles spread on a wood serving board. But, above all, I learned to choose and bake good lamb chops.



"Are you ready? Really?"

"Darn! After too many false starts, I have to be ready. I am actually better prepared to start the recollection. I improved my notes to confirm the details are secure, real and reflect our values."

I was ready and Walt was serious; for, like me, wanting to share, he wanted to listen. It involved matters dear to both of us. Walt rarely read the Bible on purpose; it was not his thing. He read articles, short dissertations on matters of the Gospels, the church's bulletin and

other material I suggested he read. I actually felt comfortable with the way he managed his spirituality -- practical and to himself. It was far better than mine. While he took our faith as it was without any special emotional stress, I had to dig for more proof of anything; I had to invest some inner acceptance of the occult. There was some innocence in Walt's practical ways, but he had an unequivocal approach to matters dear to his heart. Walt always extended a hand to anyone who genuinely asked for help. His employees were the first to get the feel and smell of all he was about. But if you crossed him, he would let you know that the one who lost was the one who received. He used to say: "I never regret what I do for others; I feel sorry for those who betray the good hand when extended -- the gesture of the Good Samaritan."

After Sunday Mass, when in Monterey, we went for our typical brunch, and then back to our living room for some TV viewing and reading. Our living room, more like a family room (one we did not have), was a favorite place to spend a placid Sunday afternoon. With no obligations of any kind, Walter had decided we would return to Castro Valley on Monday. No TV viewing -- our Raiders were not playing in this time slot. With no reading, we were ready!

"Okay, we are ready. But let's have a brief discussion on dreams. Let's talk about what we remember and what we have learned." As usual, me, the college graduate girl initiated the drill. "Do you know how long they last, what matters or events they deal with, or where they happen?"

"I never read anything about dreams or how they happen or their length. We talk, forget, and move on."

"Good point" I said. "And I bet yours would be different from mine. You may take your responsibilities with a high degree of seriousness, but never fanatically or pushing yourself to the limits."

You know me -- I am different. So, my dreams reflect my busy mind."

As usual, Elvera was pontificating like an expert on dreams.

"Okay, nice. How long do they last?" demanded Walter.

"They can last a few seconds, on an average, or as long as thirty minutes."

"That long?"

"Like I said -- yours, by your very personality and temperament, should not last long. That is the way you are -- simple, effective and uncomplicated. They should not last long."

"You are being nice to me. Any plans for the rest of the day? Shall we rent a room?"

"See, you are funny. I am also funny but you are seriously and intelligently funny. Thanks. As for renting a room, we shall see."

Elvera extended her hand to Walter. He kissed her instead.

"Okay, professor -- start the story."



"I entered a place that, to me, did not look like heaven. I went through a glass door, or so it seemed, and encountered nothing but people being escorted towards a reception area. I followed the crowd and came to this enormous half-moon reception area. There, receptionists working on computers, either interrogated people or dispatched them to ushers who escorted them to designated areas. Everything was displayed on the big screens that covered the wall -- whatever looked like walls. There were no names, background, hobbies, deeds, misdeeds, no ages, no places of origin, gender distinctions and other personal attributes. No pictures, nothing."

In this big hall, there were six gates, the size of rolling door gates in large warehouses, just like the one on your shop. Two gates on each side -- in front of us, two to the right side and two to the left." Elvera paused for a moment, seeing no signs of Walter holding back but giggling; nevertheless, she felt comfortable in proceeding. "I am glad you're not laughing." Walter waved her to continue. "Each gate had a color that kind of matched the colors of the incoming traffic and which glowed on their wrists. Mine was yellow. I looked at my wrists and they glowed yellow, in a bracelet type glow. The other colors, as I noticed later on, were, let me see, green, black, blue and grey. I am missing one color. I remember ... that's it ... orange. Orange! Certainly, this color was next to my gate."

"No white door gates?"

"Nope. The only white I saw was the white of the ushers, like angel white. No wings. But they, hundreds I presume, moved so effortlessly, like skating without skates. Everything on their part floated."

"So, the color on your wrists matched the color of your gate. Meaning you belonged to the yellow section. Could you tell the number of people in each section? Did some or other wrists display more colors than other gates?"

"Can't remember. I did not take notes of that. Unless, let me think ... yes, 'green; had less people. And that was when I signaled for one usher to explain the significance of colors."

"And..."

"I became disappointed. Yellow, meant I had to wait long for a meeting with the Lord or assistants."

"Or Saint Peter," Walter retorted while cracking up with laughter.

“What’s so funny? Of course, I was disappointed in waiting too long.”

“That was a dream. Why getting so sad?”

Elvera, now comforted with Walter’s mild and ironic interjection, proceeded in building her narrative before she met with God. She recounted with vivid pleasure, entrants immediately marked with white, being escorted behind the reception area and never seen again. These were young people, dressed normally, humbly and others in rags, with scars from wounds inflicted perhaps in slums anywhere in the world, with t-shirts framed with pictures and descriptions in different languages. A few older people also possessed white bracelets. She guessed these people were going directly to heaven.

Then she directed her narrative to those supposedly marked red. These, coming on a rolling carpet, bypassed everything. No descriptions of names, name to fame misdeeds or crimes were seen. They all came in attire as perhaps as they had died -- three-piece suits, cocktail gowns, bikinis, swim shorts, deck shoes and nightgowns. Their faces showed disgusting or horrific glares. During the long wait, Elvera could surmise that as they arrived through the revolving door, and once they had glanced down to their right, they must have felt terrorized. Others just laughed and gazed hysterically as if going to a resort or a very warm place.

“Wow. I bet they were being escorted to hell, without a chance for an interview or parole. Straight down. Or, happy with their fate.”

“I guess so. Good analogy, but funny, Walt.”

“You also cited the colors black and orange. And the color blue as practically going straight to heaven.”

“I did. Orange was almost like yellow. Migrating to green would take longer than yellow. Black is a different story and I could not

grasp fully their predicament or their final destination. It encompassed people who were religious leaders of every kind, professors in religion, philosophy, theology, atheism -- you name it. I assumed it would be any professional with influence on behavior."

"Wow! That could include anybody, including priests. Unless they repented."

"I have no idea. A few of them could have belonged to any color -- including red."

"How long did you have to fulfill your job before going to the better place?"

"Looked long. But, as I was told during my interview with God, the word or meaning of time does not exist there. Nothing is measured as it is in our planet. We just feel something and then (later) try to decipher what it meant. It is just different, unexplainable. God always smiled at my questions about earthlings' habits."

Elvera resumed her story on how she meets God. Surprised in not seeing St. Peter, God tells her that the Rock is equally interviewing entrants from the colors black, grey and orange. God reserves yellow and green for Himself. She also describes the dialogues depicting her initial sadness and then the comfort in knowing that God has a role for her or all those wearing yellow. She was told that she would graduate to green in time.

"So, you talked, he interviewed you, you felt bad, then you lightened up once a role was given to you. Were you happy?"

"Of course, I was. I knew heaven would be within my reach; because God said so. It would not be a direct line, for I had more work to do. Actually, let me think how I felt. Although pride was no longer important to me, I almost felt lucky that God had a role for me -- like I was important, and had interpersonal skills." She paused,

reconfigured her recollections and then said. "Walt, it is hard to describe."

"Tell it in any way you think. I am enjoying this trip of yours -- to heaven."

"How are you doing Vera? Good to see you. You've done nice work. Some more is required of you. Please, smile, for it will not last long, it will be just a little harsh at first. Smile! When you love me and your neighbor nothing is harsh! I just used the word for you to get the gist."

"Gist, like harsh -- earth's words? That is cool, God."

"Exactly. Our vocabulary is all logical and lovely. Thus, you'll be happy being useful to other candidates to heaven. It will be like pain and joy; more pain and joy and then relief that the place I prepared for you and my children will be yours forever."

"Nice to know that. Some suffering and then exhilaration. Suffering no more after my penance! Right?"

"Look at me Vera, it is like paying forward. You have done great things on earth, helped so many, you've created opportunities for my Holy Spirit to grant graces. I know, I know. You on earth think that you convert my stubborn and fallen away children. That is okay to think that way or until vanity possesses you all. I understand. I do. However, you no longer act with undue pride. You are fine. This temporary stage is ... call it what you want ... just a short stay before paradise. Unless many deny me, reject me, even until the last second."

"Oh, you mentioned seconds. I thought having no watches, no measuring sticks, You would not cite seconds."

"Elvera..." Elvera blinked her eyes and pursed her lips for God had addressed her earlier as Vera, an intimate approach. God resumed... "I know your mother called you Elvera when she was mad

at you. Even your husband jokes with you once in a while." Elvera broadened her smile. "I mentioned seconds, like in time, only to make you feel at home. I want you to feel this way -- relaxed and ready to roll up your sleeves and take on some important duties." Elvera was enjoying God's way of talking, his way of creating a positive environment. She also accepted God's 'Elvera' thing just as she came to accept her mother's motherly reprimand.

"Thank you, Lord. Talking to you like this is so comfortable. Am I going to see your son? Jesus? He was my idol, my rock, my bridge to everything good."

"Not this time. He is on earth still working diligently gathering lost sheep. He, and Mother Mary are always happily rescuing lost souls or inspiring them to make amends. Always!"

"I guess everyone has a role. It is not just relaxing at the beach, or playing bridge, or playing golf with Walt. Duties!"

"Of course, there is life up here. Just immensely different from life on earth. I designed it to be like here -- a sample of paradise. But I had competition. You know that. And I had to remake the mold. Remember that in my love letter to my people?"

"You mean the Book; the Bible?"

"Good call. Good knowledge."

"You're right, God. But it was so tough to keep your commandments. We are always agitated and sometimes horrified. I am anxious coming up here, even if I am in a transition mode -- in the pipeline to heaven."

"C'mon Vera. Give me a break. I am always helping you and everyone else. The only thing you have to do is trust, trust me. Tell me the truth: when you are in touch with me, concentrating and asking for help, did I betray you? Did I leave you drifting, or did I cause you to instantly find your way to the solution for your needs?"

"No, God, never did you leave me alone when I asked for help in a sincere manner. When I was sincere in my gut, you know what I mean, I got instant help. And it feels good. You remember that; don't you? I always pleaded my pardon for not trusting you. But then when I really did, you fixed the problem, or let me fix it. And I apologized to you on my knees. Didn't I?"

"Yes, you did. Sincerity unlike repetitive prayers, not from the heart, or as you said eloquently from the gut, always got my attention. You rang the bell and I delivered."

"Lord, this is so good. Talking with you as if we were brother and sister. So cool!"

"I am glad you like it. This is the way I created you and Walter in my image. In time you will be in my place -- the place I created for you and all mankind. After all it took a great deal of thinking in creating the world with all its moving parts, and reciprocal properties, all with a variety of functions where everyone was dependent on each other. Creating you and Walter took a lot more thinking. And then my plan almost got hijacked by my right-hand angel. Jealousy, absolute jealousy. And I had to re-invent myself -- time after time. I will win until the end of time, when I will re-invent myself differently."

"Wow! Great talk. I wish I were down on earth so I could tell what I learned here. Then, with all this talk it means I am in; I am here to stay. Can I take this to the bank?"

"Funny talk, still using earth's vocabulary?"

"Well, you also used earth's lingo. So, being in, where do I go now?"

"Not too fast; let's talk about the task I have for you before you come in for good -- the eternity. The task will help me and you at the same time... C'mon ... don't make that face! Just as on earth, when faith and deeds matter, you will help me by reassuring that my

children don't stray too far from my reign. Are you ready for the task?"

"But if I fail, will I still have a chance to come and stay with You? Will this take too long?"

"In earthly time it may take long. Let me tell you the details."

God explained to Elvera that her task, before coming to paradise forever, would entail following humans on earth. Staying connected through the spirit; yet, with no contacts or physical influence on the assigned human.

"Therefore, I will follow this person wherever he or she goes, have no way to make corrections on behavior, bad decisions, etc...." ... "what's there to gain, to help? Just watching bad outcomes is like torture; like purgatory!" ... "You are laughing! But I am serious! This hurts!"

"Relax Vera. The fact that there is no contact does not imply you'll have no impact. Haven't you heard of guardian angels? Haven't you heard people saying 'I was saved by a guardian angel?'"

"I guess You are right; like always. Thank you, Lord. Right now, I do not have to say 'I hope so.' Because I know so."

God smiled broadly.



"Just like that! Never showing fear in talking to God. Or as if you were brothers or teammates!"

"Yes, no fear, no anguish, no second guessing, no nothing! Remember, for the last few years my approach to God and his designs has changed measurably. Sometimes I feel I am locked in with things of God. Other times, I am confused or feel lost; like God deserted me.

Or that he left me fend for myself. However, in between, I'm staying patient, accepting my sadness and my emptiness and confusion; but never wavering because I sense it is just a matter of time when I find my footing and the bridge to God. Call it the Holy Spirit, or..."

"Your ticket to heaven!" prompted Walter.

Elvera offered no rebuttal and Walter completed his thought. "Come here my love." Elvera dragged her body towards Walter and rested her head on his chest. Walter wrapped his hand around her head, her shoulders, her neck and kissed her warmly. "I would be scared of having such a dream; even if it were as sweet as what you narrated. I do not live agitated or pessimistic or concerned. We have a good life; we have a good family. Yet, once in a while I have doubts, fears or just that I am lost and far from being ready. I can't fathom life after we finish our journey. Or like you." Walter paused, thought again what to say or to direct the conversation to other matters. Then he concluded. "I have had in the past, distant past, horrible dreams, cringing dreams. Lately they are calm, almost serene. I don't know why!"

"You must have made peace with you, with your **you**. Not that you were wild or lost. I mean you got your priorities in order and created more time for serene and revealing introspection."

"We need to rent a room. Always protecting me." Elvera threw him a flirtatious smile.

Walter liked the smile but, at the moment, preferred to add one or two more questions about the dream. "What do you plan to do now with your dream? You said earlier, before choosing me for confessor, you would talk with Father Lukas. Are you going to do that?"

"I don't think so. As a parish priest, he is always busy. You know that."

"Yes, I know. Yet, he has a lot of respect for you."

"That is good. I may use other options. Still, let's be fair here. You helped me getting it out. That is more than good enough. Unless, the other members of our group find the components of the dream interesting. We'll see."

"As far as I have seen, they all admire you. Some may actually find parts of your dream as optimal discussing points. But I am not part of the group. I just join you folks for the leftovers."

"Does that bother you, Walt?"

"None whatsoever. Joining you on drinking gatherings fits me well. For instance, Father Mancini would be good. He has done it all, has been close to it all, close to dirt, to the street and to Sam. Fausto and Sam must have their own warehouse of dreams."

"Yes, Fausto would be the ideal person to share the morsels. He is on the other side of the bay. I am sure he could be conned into joining me and some others on our side; I mean Max, or even Herb. Both like good chats. Indeed, we can use the dream as an excuse to get together. I'll think about it." Elvera paused, thought more and then said: "they'll come for any excuse."

"Max would be good. Being agnostic would make more sense. He may even share his own dreams."

"Max is so authentic. A better human being than many Catholics I know. Being on the fence is not a big deal. At this time, it is more for convenience he stays agnostic. Besides, it is so soon for him to change sides. He is the president on merit and well regarded in his conference. We get along so well, though."

"What conference are you talking about? The what's it called?"

"The Agnostic Society of Northern California!" Walter was still a bit confused and she added: "Is there anyone else?"

"I had never heard of such thing. I thought you meant the one that you and Fausto, and Herb belong!" stated Walter.

"I can see the confusion for I never mentioned Max's club before. You were thinking about 'Be-a-difference-Foundation.' Two different organizations," replied Elvera.

"Then, what do we have here?" asked Walter.

"Well, Max's organization has its own mission; like a church without being a church. What do you know about the Foundation?" Inquired Elvera.

"Not much either. Just that you drag me to a function here and there, I guess and invite me to have a meal with you guys and, by default, I pay the bill," chuckled Walter.

"That is not fair. Only a couple of times and, on both occasions, you were in a Good Samaritan mood. Even my friends felt embarrassed the second time."

"Just kidding. Your friends deserve my only way to say thanks to them. It keeps me happy knowing about the people you are engaged with. I have even learned a lot with your friends. But, now, forget Max's club. How does your foundation operate? Like the Rotary?"

"No, no similarities of any kind; including the organization's structure."

"Okay, tell me more. Such as the clubs you belong, your meetings, etc." concluded Walter.

"First it is not like the Rotary or similar service clubs who have a global structure and aligned regionally, by geographic areas. *Be-a-Difference Rainbow Foundation* is philanthropic, non-sectarian organization -- created by wealthy patrons."

"Good; like "Make a Wish Foundation?" questioned Walter.

"I do not know about it; but my guess it is not like that. Leaving that notion aside, *Be-a-Difference Rainbow Foundation*, like I said, is

made up of wealthy but equally very caring businessmen and businesswomen, entrepreneurs. Not on the same level as Bill Gates, Warren Buffet and the like. Our benefactors are millionaires but below billions. However, they lend their side-line energies, create support through shelters, donate their money and oversee their charity. If one wants to call it a charity, that is. They have eight councils in the Bay Area, who act as advisors on their plans and also engage in other smaller undertakings like the ones in which Fausto, Max and I are involved."

Elvera's explanation was credible; yet too vast in detail and scope. Walter's face conveyed that invitation for Elvera to convert the narrative into small change or put an end to the matter. "I suspect you are confused. It is a simple operation but far different than civic clubs. Besides the foundation moves quite a bit of money. Let me see: (1) The Foundation donates money to all deserving causes and their own cause ... as I mentioned before. They have budgets, plans and receive much info on their own, for they have professional consultants; (2) aside from that, they created councils of very credentialed and good-willed volunteers. It is like me and the others you've come to know. Not only do we collect and share information, but also, on a separate level, we are assigned to evaluate such information. And, in the process, we identify individuals that reflect true and tangible **be-a-difference** human beings. This task, of selecting winners, is done once every six months.

"And that is what you and Herb and Fausto get involved..." said Walter.

"Exactly! For instance, I do belong to the Advisory Board -- that big money part -- and also to one of the eight councils in the Bay Area that identifies with the smaller deeds, identify and reward people who exemplify the best of the best good-doers. You see, two different

objectives. I happen to belong to the big enchilada and the smaller one -- the smaller one that fills my heart. Get it?"

"I get it. On the smaller fish, the non-advisory, to what council do you belong? Herb and Fausto are in the city, and you and Max are here in the East Bay. How's that?" inquired Walter. "Now, this is confusing to me."

"It is and it is not. Again, each of the eight councils are aligned in geographic areas. It is just for logic alignment and not service. Because we do not serve anyone. Max and I belong to Fausto's council for friendship. We get along so well. In fact, we are well regarded in the Bay Area federation of councils. That is all. And each council has cells, ranging from six to eight members. That is why our cell meets everywhere."

"Well explained. Therefore, your organization, the big gun, does a lot of good almost underground, with no fanfare, no publicity. I like it that way. And, it does not involve politics."

"I agree with your thinking. So, where were we? Were we talking about Sam?"

"Yes, you were talking about Max and then you veered to Sam," alerted Walter.

"Thinking of Sam..." Elvera forcing herself to recollect the intended details, just said ..." Oh, Sam is such a good man. What a human being God created."

"Has Sam ever revealed details of his past? I wonder why he chose the streets for his habitat! With too much riding on his reputation, he rejects any kind of overture to main street -- a place with a room and a bed. His buddy, what's his name?"

"You mean Randolph?"

"Yes, I just met him once. But he and Sam look like two peas in the same pod."

Elvera stopped. Walter had no questions to ask. Then, remembering what she intended to say in the first place, said:

"We learned some bits and pieces about his past from Sam. It is a combination of family past, back in Georgia and also a vocation thing -- doing good occupies all his time."

"Are you close enough to him to ask questions about dreams? Are you that close?"

"You mean ask Sam questions about dreams? Never crossed my mind. It would sound weird; I am not close to him as you imply. Actually, only Fausto is close to him. Sam slips through our grasp."

Walter just grinned and waited for more. "Nevertheless, why are we now investing so much talk on dreams? Dreams are like anything else in life. Everyone has them and encounters them. One has to feel comfortable sharing dreams as a way of getting a useful conversation started. Sam would be far-fetching. Not even Fausto, who deals with him almost every day, has a sure bridge to Sam."

"Okay, you have a plan."

Elvera just nodded, then stayed quiet, pensive. She conceded to herself that her dreams were compelling enough to merit a conversation marathon. Still, there was the possibility that they could fade away soon.

"Look, it is almost four o'clock. Do you want to go out for dinner? An early dinner?"

"Nah. I am still full from the brunch. How about going for a matinee to see a good movie on the big screen? And then decide on food. What do you say?"

"Okay! A movie again is not a bad idea."

“Let me google on what’s available.”

“That’s a deal.”

Fausto and Herbert

Adopting Sam

The best way to find yourself

Is to lose yourself in the service of others

----- *Gandhi*

Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile

----- *Einstein*

Elvera called Fausto and listened to the typical recorded greeting stating he was away from his phone and that a message would be desirable. Text messaging would also be okay via his cell phone. Elvera quickly thought up an adequate reply that reflected her astute thinking, or thinking well on the fly: "This is your friend from the East Bay. Yes, with a woman's voice, perhaps the only woman in the East Bay that calls you for confession. Why bother with text messaging when e-mail would do the same? At least I could print your message if you lied to me. Sorry, Fausto, I am in a good mood. I just want to talk to you about a couple of issues. Greetings and peace!"

That was one of her important calls she had in mind right after she arrived from the long weekend away at her Monterey home. The

dream, the enjoyable discussion of her dream with Walter and the need to proceed to other matters, gave her a bundle of energy and some sort of adrenaline towards finding additional answers to her concerns. Walter had cleared the shell covered pick-up truck and placed the coolers and plastic boxes in their right spots. They had to be parked in the right spots, for, after years of accumulating tools, plumbing and air conditioning parts in his garage, he gave them all up. Not really. He summoned two of his employees to clear the garage of unnecessary tools and parts out of there and reroute them to recycling places or transfer them to his business warehouse. He had succeeded in keeping it masterfully cleaned and organized to the point that sometimes friends, on short visits, would claim they would live in the garage year-round, or even have an occasional drinking party.

Arriving at two o'clock in the afternoon allowed Walter no time to either go to the shop or find a buddy for a nine-hole round of golf. He had not played golf at all for almost two weeks. The weather had been so-so and Elvera was on one of her spiritual journeys that now included a dream. He had hoped the conversation on the weekend would be the last chapter on his assignment as confidant and dream interpreter. Knowing Elvera's nature, he doubted that the end would be near. Actually, she had already begged him to recall some of his own dreams. *No way -- they are not pretty or perhaps they are scary.*

Elvera, while taking care of food for dinner, had called Father Fausto Mancini and then planned to call Pastor Herbert Hawkins. A certain plan was forming in her mind. Some upcoming assignments were on the calendar: a charity talk for a group of elderly women, and a presentation at a Catholic High School. The first would bring some dough for a Catholic Charity Foundation, and the latter would excite late teenagers -- high school seniors -- to give their all to worthy causes. Her mantra with these young people was that they should shy away from the usual clichés of *you are the future of society*, and,

instead, render inspiration towards becoming *the now movers and shakers of the world*. She was adamant that they not only live their age but also be relevant: *look at me, I am almost on social security, taking more pills than milk, and losing my hearing. You are credible. Then, be relevant right now. Waiting for my age will not make the cut, for wisdom does not solve all the problems. Engagement and purpose will make a difference.*

She would continue and master her delivery with *Yeah, yeah, I am wiser now and can still do things others have not done yet. But you live in the now, not on older people's schedule. I also like to play bridge*. She would vary her speeches and interchanges and provide fresh ideas always. Nevertheless, she mostly defied and challenged the young folks to start acting and making a difference in the moment. *How long do you know you will live? Long! I hope. But no one knows*. The students always applauded her mini-speeches and challenged her to visit again with fresh ideas.

For Elvera, Fausto was the ideal parish priest without spending too much time in the building. He had a competent deacon who had retired from the banking industry, a parish secretary and a few volunteers that handled all the books and other needs. He also had a parish council that managed the simple church business; like a business. They possessed one uncanny attribute -- an ability to attract generous donors that would serve well two other parishes in Latin countries and in Africa. Father Fausto Mancini's was a small parish in the business district, with a typically lower number of parishioners. However, he had a generous number of visitors and Mass attendees during day-time. Besides visits to two hospitals, a funeral service every now and then, one assisted living and retirement center, member of a couple of semi-civic groups, Fausto's remaining time was around homeless environments. He always found time for the downtrodden or soup kitchen events. Elvera would label him a

“missionary on wheels.” He moved quickly from one environment to another almost effortlessly. She even remembered that one day a few months ago, she had partnered with Fausto, both dressed in clumsy clothing, in order to pay visits to their clients in the streets, like brother and sister or as a middle-aged husband and wife team. That was the one and only time she had come home totally vindicated. “This is living,” she remembered saying it to Walter.

“Cheers, Vera. Relax. It was just a missed telephone call. You must have forgotten I have a cell phone; a good one and my only extravagance. You dialed the church’s number instead. I suspect it is dinner time. You can call me after your dinner -- until midnight.”

“Thanks Fausto. Walt had gone to the store and I was in the bathroom. Missed your call by a few seconds.”

“Just like that. No secrets at all.”

“What’s there to hide?” He laughed, she did, too.

“How was the weekend in Monterey? Was the weather good? Did you play golf at Pebble Beach?”

“Pebble Beach? Me, on a retiree’s budget?” Fausto laughed and she continued. “No. In my case, you know the best golf I play is being a good caddy. After eight misses I would pull the ball up and keep it in my pocket. You know, I avoid annoying Walt and his buddies because I take too many swings.” Fausto understood and applauded her strategy. “Anyway, no time for golf; besides, some of Walt’s buddies were away. But we had a good time, worthy of the area. We also took short and long walks, enjoyed the ocean breeze, a good movie and lots of chat with Walt.” Elvera hesitated hitting Fausto with details about her dream. The importance of the dream could not be mixed with casual talk.

“I admire the way you and Walt are handling more free time together. Most people I come to know get very nervous and uncomfortable in having much time together, kind of invading each

other's territory. It is a logical phenomenon -- invading space and time."

"You are correct. I know some couples that cannot take it without a fuss, or even some friction." Fausto sensed that Elvera had another justification for their getting along well. Indeed! "Remember that Walt finds time to visit the shop a few hours a day or when it pleases him. Golf and baseball games occupy his time as well. So, we naturally give some space to each other. And I am busy; and will always stay busy and involved. The rest of the time, which is plenty more, we spend discovering each other's secrets. We do have and cherish our independence as much as our togetherness."

"That is true. Lucky you and lucky everyone who benefits from your kindness and Walt's wits. Anyway, what's on the table?"

"We need to have a simple preparation for our potential meeting with professor Eichelberger. I am not saying all of us in the group, but at least you, Herb, and I need to meet for some preliminary conversation."

"Okay, I agree. And what do you have in mind? My schedule for this week is light and typical. In the next two weeks things get tight."

To Elvera, Fausto's light schedule meant there were no funerals to service, no meetings with Catholic Charities, or Sam was not in trouble. "Well, tomorrow I have an afternoon meeting in church and a speaking engagement at a Catholic High School on Friday. Wednesday and Thursday look good for me. I just need to call Herb. Unless..."

"... Unless I do it."

"Of course, you talk regularly. Being adversaries makes no difference to you."

Fausto just smiled; Elvera also could tell as he said: "Hold your accusation. Herb has his ideas and beliefs. Yet, we both deliver the goods and God so far has not told us to handle spiritual needs differently. I know you are joking." Elvera just sent a few sighs on her

side of the line. "I take it you want us on your side of the Bay. That means we'll take BART and you pick us up at the Broadway station, just as we did a month ago."

"Right on. Thursday could be ideal; 11:30 in the morning I will pick up you gentlemen there." Silence followed until Elvera found courage to add the clincher, and no clincher. "Listen I will pay for lunch. Walt got a bonus from the company. The kids were very generous. Herb has money but your pockets are as clean as Sam's pockets."

"That's a deal. And taking alms comes with the territory. Herb rarely takes a pass either. I will call you if Herb cannot make Thursday. Okay?"

"Okay. See you Thursday."



"You guys look spiffy, casual but modern. Did you board the same train?"

"No, but we talked over the phone. We were about eight minutes apart. I waited at the station," Herbert replied.

"So, you like my attire, matching Herb's. Fortunately, he carries no tie."

"Normally you do not tell jokes. It is my territory. Yet, I like a man (every now and then) who adds a tie to his repertoire of clothing. Now, you, Fausto are a surprise to me. The rags sporting 49ers ads needed to go. You don't look homeless, but fit for intellectual arguments." Both Herbert and Fausto could tell they were targeted for smart talk from and with Elvera.

"Shall we go back to the city, Herb? I sense we cannot match or are not ready for Vera's wit. She must have a plan. And we have had

no advance notice. Talking about Eichelberger could have been accomplished by e-mail, anyway. Don't you agree, Herb?" Herbert just nodded and said:

"I do not talk your language. But enough of this BS. Where are we going? Fausto tells me Walt hit the jackpot. You are paying. Is that it?"

"No secrets, Fausto. Yes, I will be glad to splurge with you, eclectic folks. Let's walk to my car parked outside. I was lucky to have found a space on the street. And then let's drive to Emeryville. There is a good place to eat and talk; noisy but ideal for our chat."

"Eclectic?! Hanh! That's what we are now, brother Herbert -- eclectic." Herbert chuckled, Elvera offered a modest smile, but said in defense of the use of her adjective:

"Yes, you are. Both of you are. One is a Roman Catholic priest and the other a Lutheran minister. Both of you espouse different philosophies but are currently ecumenical partners, post Vatican II adherents."

"Ecumenical! Post Vatican II! Way past reformation. It took that long -- over four hundred years," noted Herbert.

"Let's go Vera, before you drown in your own adjectives. I can take a good (free) lunch," concluded Fausto.



"Good place. Never been here. I did come before, a mile further, to Berkeley. The restaurant was famous for good Italian cuisine and sea food. I guess it is now closed or disappeared. Let me see... Spengers!" said Herbert.

"Never been in either," Fausto said.

"Fisherman's wharf was getting too expensive and too crowded," continued Herbert.

"I loved Spenger's sourdough bread. I would go there just for their bread and butter. One flaw, though: unless you enjoyed a good time at the bar, the wait at times was prohibitive. That is why these other two restaurants came to be; I guess. It is my take. Still, in typical honesty, I never had trouble finding a table. Walt knew at least two waiters that responded nicely to Walt's tips. I remember one saying -- 'your table is reserved, Mr. Betancourt. Follow me.' All the time. That is what I call 'who knows who.'"

They ordered the food. Fausto ordered a Ruben Sandwich with salad on the side and Herbert ordered a crab sandwich with French fries. Still undecided, Elvera ordered calamari steak with their delicious mashed potatoes and glazed string beans. All opted for chardonnay. Red wine, at lunch, would cause drowsiness. They wanted to talk about the meeting. Elvera did not care less for the professor's project; her dream was an exclusive matter camouflaged in project preparation.

"Cheers! To our friendship and now to Walt as well."

"Thanks, Vera. This is one of a few times I do not profess vows of poverty," said Fausto.

"In my case I am just honoring Jesus' miracle -- the changing of water into wine," confirmed Herbert. "And by the way, Fausto, did Jesus transform water into red wine or make the water taste like wine? Like this one, though white. Really good."

"You stumped me with such a question. I have no idea. In my seminary years, reading the Bible and learning more about the history of the times, I have no recollection about grape and wine choices. Yet, that area in the Mediterranean is not a haven for white wines. Anyway, we are not here to discuss viniculture."

"Your conversation or the subjects for conversation are always reasons for me to be excited about talking with you. You play your

thoughts well and place bridges to heaven with such subtlety." She paused then added: "I was hungry."

Herbert also hinted he was enjoying his crab sandwich and then said: "I do not mind talking about professor Eichelberger's project. It has meaning. And by including us in the mix, it could improve the students' thesis in philosophy. Two religious professionals, one credible Catholic layperson and one capable Agnostic, must make a difference on their research. However, we need two more players to make up the number he suggested. Six students and six interviewees. Right?"

"Right," confirmed Elvera. "Max in, makes four and, two more outside the religious main stream, should provide a good balance." Elvera paused, thought further and added a provable clincher. "The professor had his thoughts on Sam. Having him as kind of a Mother Teresa without habits and religious connections, would guarantee great outcomes."

Fausto added: "Yes, it would be a home run. But he'll never show his face on matters like this one. No way! We need to find the missing pieces elsewhere. Sorry, Mr. Professor. A homeless person in the research would hit the papers like fireworks."

"Okay, I know Sam but not nearly as well as you two know him. He is kind of a hero to me -- that is all I know." She paused; Fausto and Herbert thought she had more on Sam. Instead she said: "I have an answer that can fill the voids."

"Go ahead; we trust you," said Herbert.

"It is almost a long shot, but it is worth a try. Walt could fit the mold of an unattached spiritual person, for he is a man with no religious attachments. He goes to Mass with me on Sundays and on special occasions. He has no religious trappings, can handle a conversation involving beliefs, etc. but, he is not like me. And, certainly like you. He will fit because, in spite of his superficial involvement in matters such as the ones we deal regularly, he

respects his culture of the old country and sponsors anything that elevates the soul -- human beings. In other words, his Christian traditions are ingrained in him; his achievements have been balanced with pride and modesty. Which means he can deliver common sense."

She paused as the two waited for their moment. "He has just a high school education and a few courses at a junior college. Nonetheless, he reads his stuff. I like what he reads. And he, initially pushing my idea away, will cave in. I know that."

"Did you finish? You can go on; but I am sold on the idea. Relevancy wins me all the time. Bring him in."

"Thanks Herb. I suspect you will agree, Fausto."

"Of course, I do. He is recruited. We still need one more."

"I will fix it, too. We need another woman. There'll be female students in the game. Perhaps a ratio of forty-sixty percent. Do you think so?"

"Nowadays, yes. You Catholics still remain stuck on no-women priests. However, women are equally engaged on philosophy." Fausto dismissed Herbert's bait.



They were savoring the last pieces of their food. Elvera had a thought about two not yet fully identified players in the group of six. She opened the talk:

"I am still thinking about the players. We are in as well as Max. The other two depend on my convincing them to also join. My friend would fit quite well and Walt could enlist and provoke some laughs -- Archie Bunker style. Can you add anything to this; in case I do not succeed?"

"I should not worry about this thing. The professor will be happy with us four. I guess Fausto will not worry about it, either. Right?" retorted Herbert.

Father Mancini's silence was indicative of, so far, Elvera could deliver the correct players to add relevancy to the professor's project. Elvera added: "This is it, then."

"Really? How can you be so sure that Fausto has said his peace? Besides our thought in including Sam?"

Elvera replied: "His silence tells me he defers his choices to us. He's a busy man and I suspect he could find someone that would adequately fit in with us. He would name Sam if it fit the bill. Isn't that it, Herb?" Fausto Mancini was still enjoying what was left of his sandwich, while exchanging smiles with Herbert and Elvera.

"Okay Herb. It sounds like you know him quite well, too; you know his environment and secrets. However, you two have been friends for some time, I guess. I have known you folks for just two years. Did you know each other before you knew me?"

Mancini said: "You are talking about him, not Sam?!" Elvera nodded yes. "Herb, up close ... not more than two years. Maybe three. I had seen him in our organization for some years; but never close. Remember BaDR (Be a Difference Rainbow) is not small. We cover the whole Bay Area."

"I know. How did this happen that you became like twins?" asked Elvera.

"Tell her, Herb." Herbert agreed.

"Strange ways, or God's ways. It was through my brother-in-law, a Chicago resident. It will take long to at least do it justice. It involves Sam, too."

"I have time and this sounds like a rich find. How about you, Fausto?" said Elvera.

“Go ahead Herb. Start the story. My phone has not rung yet; no messages. Like Elvera suggested, we can get coffee. Vera pays the bill and we move to the bar.”

Elvera for sure was experiencing excitement beyond her expectations. After all, these missionaries of the street were also funny.



Edmund Conrad walked side by side with what he thought was a homeless person. His clothes were shabby, not smelly, dirty or even tattered. He had met him with another homeless person -- perhaps buddies -- on the street. Both were not sitting as most homeless did -- their backs against the wall, slumped on their knees, eyes semi-closed, holding a wrinkled brown paper bag housing a bottle of Bronco wine. Their eyes were semi-open as they extended their hands for small change or begging for food. Food or money for food was the customary cover for something else. Maybe if they changed the routine -- like a new marketing idea -- they would have more success. It would be worth a try. But his, now walking together companion, had to be homeless. After all, he was in San Francisco, close to downtown or thereabouts, in one of those many streets crossing Mission and/or Market streets. As beautiful and quaint San Francisco was, homelessness was an additional fixture -- many times an overblown fixture. He knew that because his brother-in-law had indicated in so many words what San Francisco had accomplished in combating the ever-growing population of homeless folks.

He still did not know why he spontaneously followed this homeless person; he did not know his name and or felt motivated to ask or entertain introductions. Then, when they met, he was oblivious to any method of introductions between a homeless person and him - - this upstanding and relatively well-off Chicagoan and visitor to the City by the Bay. After meandering through almost a dozen blocks -- still not aware of any valid reason -- and almost silently following this homeless person without a name, he came to a halt at a church. Yes, a Catholic Church. I guess, directly in the middle right side of the street.

The church, if it had displayed no name, could be taken for any other building. Of course, the church bell-tower provided some sort of a distinct feature, a different use. It could also be that the homeless was a disguised, an undercover Catholic priest, now ready to convert him to his flock. A Lutheran himself, mildly involved in his own church, he could be an easy prey. Certainly, he had to be easy catch for he still was unsure of this act of agreeing to follow this San Franciscan homeless which he soon would come to know as the priest or one of the priestly cohorts. The church's sign was visible, the façade looked okay. It was clean, absent of any decrepit material or begging for repairs or revealing an old and cold past. Just like the rest of the buildings surrounding this church. The door of the smaller -- one floor only -- building adjacent to the church opened up after the homeless' two soft knocks. A male, perhaps in his late forties or fifties, with curly black hair, now somewhat unruly from the day's activities, dressed in a faded black and gold distinctively 49er sweatshirt and grey, also worn sweatpants, opened the door, greeted the homeless guy with a broad smile and uttered the most likely usual greeting:

"Good afternoon, Sam." Sam stayed motionless like absentminded or lost for greetings, a reciprocation of sorts. "Yes, good afternoon. It's already four o'clock; very strange to see you this late on a Monday, following the last Sunday of the month what's happening, partner?"

I guess I was right -- a partner in the begging business, thought Edmund.

Edmund was not hurt that he was being ignored -- unceremoniously ignored. Both the man in the 49er-attire and the homeless man (still for now homeless man) had not acknowledged his presence in any typical or perhaps awkward fashion. Edmund waited and waited more. Well, he recognized that the homeless man had not yet answered the "what's happening" question from the 49er-dressed-and-undercover-for-sure priest.

Then, while certain there would be no answer and receiving an equally broad and warm smile, Edmund got the answer he had waited for. "Are you two together?" Both -- the homeless and Edmund -- nodded yes.

Addressing Sam and not losing sight of Edmund, the supposed priest added: "What is the catch this time? A Montgomery Street Executive businessman? A wealthy donor?" Edmund chuckled, while the homeless just smiled meekly. "C'mon, what's the deal, Sam?"

Now Edmund knew the disguised homeless had a name -- "Sam." How nice, a comfortable and cozy name. Sam replied: "No, he isn't San Franciscan. He's a tourist -- a very generous tourist." Sam paused and then followed with the clincher reply: "You know, I need your help. He wants to give me one-hundred dollars."

"One-hundred dollars? Hah, that's nice. Don't you know his name?" Sam shook his head -- indicating a perfect no. "Didn't you ask? The right mannered gent forgot to follow his own rule?"

The disguised priest's speech was supported by an Italian-type hand gesticulation, a traditional on-going ribbing, a lovely scolding. All in the same motion. Sam looked down somewhat meekly and somewhat mischievously. At least his contrite smile looked mischievous. Now directing his total attention to Edmund, the presumed priest offered his hand and said: "I'm Fausto Mancini -- the pastor of this church. And you sir? Gracing this encounter with your presence and taken for a ride by this man, Mr. Sam Williams."

Edmund appeared lost, Father Mancini rescued him: "And your name?" *Is this priest joking, is he a jester, or has he taken an afternoon shot of tequila?* thought Edmund. *Maybe he does comedy on the side.*

Okay, Edmund had the first guess revealed. The man with curly, disheveled hair was a priest without a habit. And he was jovial, plain old vanilla. Perhaps he was a successful apostle of the church. "My name is Edmund Conrad. I don't know why I am here with...." pointing to Sam he continued ... "now I know he is Sam. Yes, with Sam. I just followed him." Edmund hesitated, then said: "he said I had to meet you before I handed him a few bucks, my donation. I had no idea it would be to a church."

"Sorry for asking, are you uncomfortable with that? Money for the church?"

Edmund ventured no answer. He was the donor and required no justification for an offer from his hard-earned money. Usually nothing would floor him or cause any sort of stuttering. However, what had developed so far was news to him, and it came faster than he expected. "I don't know what to say." He paused and then decided to take charge: "Gosh it's no big deal, not a lot of money, anyway. What's the point? I just met you and I don't know anything about Sam. As far as I could tell he's..."

"A homeless? Anyone can say that. Of course, he is. But one with a significant and lovely difference. Thank God for that." Edmund was relieved the homeless had some credentials in the begging business. Father Mancini continued. "Let me share some details. Sam is what he is, a great human being." *He changed tones with such ease - from comedian and now to a preacher. Of course, he must preach his sermons.* Edmund's brain was racing with configurations of this priest's mode of conversation. The chat was definitely out of his league. "All the big money he comes to collect is dropped with me. He does have a place but not with the safe arrangements to keep money. The money is his for whatever the good things he does. I am like his bank. He drops money and gets money when he needs and asks. Meantime, we're friends and I love hearing his stories of mercy, which never exceed a dozen words."

"Thank you, thanks for sharing; now I know. Is Sam connected with your church?"

"No, he is not. He's his own boss and master. If you get what I mean, he's a servant of God even if he does not acknowledge it or tell it."

Edmund Conrad was not confused. Just surprised at becoming a witness to a warm if not a slowly developing intriguing story, by an intriguing and funny priest. Father Mancini was reading Edmund's conflict well and offered a more definitive thought: "No, Sam is not a 'homeless' by fate alone. Or by design, if there is some vocation or divine intervention in the mix." *Big words, philosophical statements I'm not used to; well, unless I'm in the company of Herbert,* thought Edmund.

Then, looking sideways at Sam and just to make sure his next question was appropriate, Edmund said. "Okay, that is a good summary of Sam's good character. Tell me more. I may like to hear

more descriptions or stories about Sam." In truth, Edmund had plenty of time. He was just enjoying this freelance tourist stroll through the city now with funny twists. Sam, however, appeared uncomfortable with the usual praise coming from Father Mancini and now piggy-backed by Mr. Conrad. He kind of slowly danced around as his feet tip-toed and slowly swirled. Both Father Mancini and Edmund Conrad took note of that, almost laughing. It had to mean many things, including Sam's apparent reluctance to hear additional praise.

Father Mancini put a softer spin in his story. "Well, Sam has a place to stay. He just chooses to be around those he knows he can help and get results."

Edmund's curiosity increased. He thought he would learn something that is rarely shared in normal conversations or everyday news and in an apparent safe environment -- near or at the door of a church, a house of God. Nothing that could go viral in social media was equally worth knowing. Yet, he was being introduced to Father Mancini only for a specific purpose -- Sam's purpose. Not as an invited guest for a chat or for a fact-finding story.

"I sense that Sam is ready to go, ready to continue his work. I have a little time. Do you care for some tea?"

Sam was ready to leave but waited to see if Mr. Conrad accepted the tea invitation or chose to walk back with him to the spot of their initial encounter. Seeing no immediate action, he looked at Father Mancini and hinted he had a question.

"I know, you're late and think I forgot you. I did not." Sam's smile was no longer meek. It was as broad as his eyes now revealed. "I have three bags for you. They contain good stuff; of course, with irrelevant expired dates. At least two bags of Lays potato chips are in the bags. Do you want to take some now or tomorrow? It does not matter that it is one more day old."

"Not now. I've got to catch up with other business. Randolph and me will come tomorrow morning. Thank you. Always thank you."

"Sure... I thank you, too." Sam, guessing Mr. Conrad would stay for tea, waved goodbye to Father Mancini and extended his two hands to Mr. Conrad's own hand, warmed it with a pious smile and vanished. Sam's hands looked as clean as his posture.

Sam was already on his way out when Father Mancini yelled at him: "If you show up after the seven-thirty Mass I will have warm pancakes and hot chocolate for both of you. Unless someone needs spiritual help. You know what I'm talking about." Sam knew it well. Sometimes Father Mancini would thank him for coming at the right moment -- interrupting him from tiring schmoozing -- the daily dose from old parishioners.

Now alone and still on the side walk, Edmund Conrad hoped Father Mancini would renew the offer for a cup of tea. *Not yet? he thought.* "You see, more than a year ago Sam was offered shelter at a large home subsidized by a Lutheran Church here in the city." Mr. Conrad's gaze almost froze -- *a Lutheran Pastor*, he murmured? "The Pastor had met Sam and also me at a charitable gathering. He became spellbound by Sam's heroics for being awarded the be-a-difference-man of the year recognition. It was a humbling thing at this low key and overly secular organization."

Father Mancini could not read the effect of his words on Edmund. Conrad's face had changed colors and expression. That caused Father Mancini to rush a concluding remark. "The Lutheran Pastor offered him a permanent shelter; modest as many shelters are, but a good shelter."

"Forgive me for interrupting," said Edmund Conrad while smiling and hoping Sam had not gone out so fast and away from his sight. No luck. "Can you tell me the name of the Lutheran Pastor?"

Then added: "Could he be someone by the name of Herbert Hawkins?"

"Yes," said Father Mancini with a surprised, mostly dumbfound look. "How do you know this? You just met Sam a few moments ago? Isn't it true?"

"I guess I can accept a cup of tea now. Is it still an offer?" Father Mancini smiled and allowed him to proceed.

"Of course! And are you sure you can have a long chat?"

Father Mancini's progressive smile was a little disconcerting for Edmund, so he concluded: "Why not? This must be part of your ministry. Yes?"

"Sure, come in."

As both walked from the door onto the narrow hallway Father Mancini explained: "Sam is truly unique. He's the best example of natural humility. I value this so much because it is the most difficult virtue for me to handle." Then, taking a breather, added: "Pastor Hawkins was also touched by Sam's transparent and virtuous behavior." He paused again. "So, even far away, you know Herb Hawkins?"

"Of course, I do. You don't know this but he married my daughter last Saturday."

Father Mancini stopped, looked straight into Edmund's eyes and said: "Really? What a small world! Of course, we're far away and yet close. Miraculous," retorted Father Mancini.

He chose the moment to explain the meaning of the three rooms surrounding the hallway. There was a little office with bookcases, a desk, two chairs and other memorabilia. Another small room had a couch, a single kneeling prayer pew, another modest size bookcase. The walls were covered with pictures of some icons,

including ones of two popes, and the prominent wooden cross hanging from the wall. The third room was a makeshift dining area with a dining table for four, five chairs. The dining room had a large opening in the wall that lead to a small kitchen. It had again a small counter with a sink and a faucet, two small cabinets with dishes, glasses, and a useful refrigerator. Other minor kitchen utensils completed the entertainment arrangement. Beyond these, there were two small bedrooms with a shared full bathroom.

Father Mancini excused himself and walked towards the kitchen where water was boiling. Conrad could tell, for the hissing from the kettle was intensifying in noise. Tea was served, sipped as they warmed themselves to some juicy revelations -- all about Sam.

"Sam rarely uses the shelter except for a nap. I guess during the day, as most occupants are out, he goes there to his room, takes care of things he needs to take care, including interacting with the impromptu shelter users. He even cooks occasionally. Like the food I set aside, food with labels showing an expiration date." Edmund Conrad was in authentic if not virtual listening mode, and signaled Mancini to go on. "You see, cans of ravioli, beans, uncooked pasta and other items. He shares the food with some people at the shelter and the others, his friends on the streets, under the freeways, in alleys and unused spots."

"I meant to ask you about the bags of food -- expired food value. Do you also feed the homeless?"

"Oh, those bags!? We, at the church -- I guess most churches perpetually ask their flock to bring food -- ask and receive non-perishable stuff and other items every last Sunday of the month. Yesterday was that Sunday. Most food is sent away to food pantries, shelters for battered women. You name it. However, we're careful in

not sending away food that show severely expired dates. Church volunteers sort it all on Monday."

"That's a shame for some food is still good, still edible" Edmund interjected.

"You're right. And I know of tons of food that are thrown away. Those dates are phony."

"How come?"

"Easy. Most dates reflect the merchandise turn over in stores. Not the shelf value. Besides some of these shelters receive government subsidies. Allowing expired date food does not sit well with the government. It's a catch twenty-two thing."

"So, some of the expired food is given to Sam?"

"Correct. Sam always comes early Monday. He was late this time and thought I would forget him."

"Does Sam attend church services? You call these services attending Mass?"

"No, he does not. I do not know if he's religious or what religion, if any, he belongs to. One thing I have noticed or caught him a few times doing is waiting for me when I return late from other errands. I catch him in the church, in those back pews, just thinking or meditating. He feels awkward when I catch him still, like enjoying a quiet moment."

"So, you never talked with him about religion."

"Never. It wouldn't matter. We both understand the language of silence and mutual respect. Deeds speak for ourselves."

Edmund Conrad was feeling that special spiritual lift. His eyes were fixated on every word Father Mancini uttered; like the eyes could listen or talk. Mancini continued: "I wish I could be as useful and relevant as he is."

"You like him?"

"Certainly, I do. It is easy to love and admire that human being."

"How did you come to know him? The same way as Herbert? At this gathering?"

"Oh, no. A long time ago. Let me see, seven or ten years ago. Maybe longer than that."

"It makes sense -- long ago. The way you two talk with or to each other, it conveys a long and solid friendship. Was he homeless then? No family?"

"Okay, that is a long sentence."

Edmund smirked a genuine smile; his lips revealed the difference between a smile and smirking.

"Let me get the order of things here. First with me: I was ordained at age thirty-two; in Boston. I'm a Dominican priest, you see." Edmund could not tell the difference between a Dominican priest or any other." Right before my hitting twenty-eight, knowing and living the ABCs of life and totally unsure what to do next, I decided to become a priest, to do things for others. Then fresh from being ordained I was assigned to teach at a Catholic High School -- teach and become the school chaplain."

Edmund intervened: "Do you do any teaching now? Pastors must be so busy and do not have enough time to teach?"

"No, I do not teach. In fact, after a few years I didn't feel fit to do that. The assignment was too easy and the students were smart, motivated, from balanced and upper middle-class families. I needed some challenge, I needed tough environments. You know, I was an idealist. One of the vows we are asked to take is humility. Idealists are rarely humble. Then, at my request, I transferred to a New York parish and a grammar school. I saw the light there because the area was an inner-city environment with poor working-class families."

Edmund interrupted father Mancini. "You are here now. Being an idealist, you found an environment to live your dream or your calling. What got you to come here? Pardon me for being nosy."

"No, I don't mind talking about me. I already know much about you. And, oh, and your cousin Herbert. Here is the rest of my story about being here. A few years later -- around my early forties -- another priest I had known before, recommended I come to San Francisco -- to a parish that needed someone with an Italian name and fit to work with a mix of rich and some people not so rich, border line poor. The community was changing."

"So, you speak Italian?" asked Edmund.

"Are you kidding? Because I said 'Italian name'? That was a joke: I just talk with my hands and a word or two. I'm happy, though. Stay with me, I'm close to getting to Sam. During those years, I was still idealistic, but not fond of rigid schedules. Being an assistant Pastor with some free time, fit my choices. I would venture to the areas where many homeless congregated. I felt I belonged there -- at least in my free time. That is where I met Sam. He was as dysfunctional as one can get. There is no need for glamorous details. I learned he had been in Vietnam, got wounded with shrapnel on his left side." He paused to give an example: "Did you notice the left side of his face? Some parts do not have beard. His body's left side has scars all over. So, even wounded but recuperated, he decided to rejoin until the war ended in the mid-seventies. He took odd jobs here and there but never settled in anything. His wife and child deserted him and his life went south. I mean ... they got tired of him. He came to San Francisco, joined some of his buddies, perhaps veterans from the service. Bad company. Vietnam ruined many good people. The carnage to which they were witness was also too much for their young minds. He disintegrated and homelessness became his life."

"Sad story. The nation will never know the true impact of vicious wars. Vietnam was one of them. Iraq is another one. We will never know." Edmund paused. Father Mancini appeared finished. Edmund still was a question or two away. "So, you met him in the dumps. How about his family? Did they reconnect? Does he receive government benefits?"

"As far as I came to know, he never tried to reconnect with his family. He never allowed me to address that subject. I respected his privacy. Yes, he receives Veteran benefits, but not as much as he should or is entitled to. He messed it up when he rejoined the second time. After all he had been wounded. In any case the meager benefits are gone by the third week. All to help his clients. If he had more, he would give more and to more people."

"The way I see, you are a hero. You helped him find himself and a way to be useful."

"With the exception of the hero thing, you're right on all the things you said. A miracle my friend?! No. He does his thing better than anyone else. He is like family without the usual visits or connections. In other words, I can say we are very close with few words."

The stories appeared too raw, too true but equally a blessing to Edmund Conrad. Father Mancini went on: "Back to the shelter -- the one Sam uses. The house accommodates close to eighteen people; or more on Winter days. The house is divided into four bedrooms, with two bathrooms for all. Each large bedroom, with bunk beds, sleeps six and the other is tiny. That's Sam's quarters. Even if he rarely sleeps there."

"And why does Sam do that and sleep on the streets?"

"I call Sam the Mother Teresa of the homeless. He's smart. But he is a true missionary without an official mission or a missionary

organization. It is during the night that he does his work: talks, asks, tells, instructs and above all, kind of influences behavior changes in those he knows can do it."

Father Mancini stopped to reconfigure his own question. "You mentioned you met him with another homeless. Right?" Edmund Conrad nodded yes. "That other homeless had to be Randolph, a former homeless man who was down on his luck and doing drugs. Now he's like an assistant to Sam. That is what I call them: Master and apostle." Both laughed. "Their mission -- well, I coined it a mission -- is to rehabilitate everyone that they come across. And they do this with true modesty. Only a few cops know the story. He threatens them to stay silent -- a small price for his heroics to stay on. Otherwise, he would run away. He's done that once before. The cops know better."

"So, Herbert learned about Sam and did his good deed towards Sam. Sam, by all measures, is someone that the world should know about," blurted Edmund Conrad.

"It has to be on Sam's terms. Sam is astute and knows the world so well. He hates politics, and he disdains charity for show or for tax write-offs. He's principled to the core."

Edmund Conrad rubbed his hands, reached for the rest of the tea and waved his head right and left two times. Father Mancini smiled, too. Then added: "it's getting late for you. Yet I'm curious. Herbert married your daughter at his church?"

"Oh, no. I live in Chicago. Actually, in a suburb of Chicago. He's married to my sister. My daughter is attending Berkeley to get her degree in law, she found the love of her life and decided to get married."

"I see, nothing unusual. America is so mobile. Are you returning to Chicago soon?"

"Not yet; next week. The whole family entourage from our area is going to Yosemite tomorrow. After that, we will travel along the coast to Santa Monica. And then return to San Francisco for just a day and a night before going back to Chicago. Just enough time to confront Herbert on extending a hand to Sam."

"That's good. I sense Pastor Hawkins has changed a bit since I first met him up close at that gathering. He appeared then as a self-absorbed religious person. He was well mannered, well dressed, like an executive. Now he's more engaged and detached from the formalities. Even his attire has changed."

"I know what you mean. I noticed that change, too. He's looser, far more gregarious, less guarded, less cautious. With the wedding thing and many guests -- out of town guests -- it was difficult to chat with him more intimately. I like his demeanor now. I will learn more next week."

"Where was the wedding ceremony? At Hawkins' church?"

"No, it was not. My daughter's fiancée, I mean that's her husband now, is of Italian descent and naturally Catholic. It was at his Catholic Church near the Golden Gate Park. It was a dual officiating thing. Very well done."

"I see, another miracle in ecumenical partnership. God must be smiling.... Me, too."

"I guess you're right. The world needs more unity and fewer divisions," replied Edmund.

Both appeared having had their fill of meaningful conversation. Anything beyond now would be superfluous chat. It was getting close to six pm, too. Edmund Conrad was surprised he had received no calls from his wife who after lunch decided to go shopping with the other two couples. Edmund thought that breaking away from the group, preferring to do free-lance walking through downtown, gave him the

better part. Thus, he experienced no regrets. Still he worried the phone had not rung. He excused himself for a moment, pulled the tiny *I-phone* from his shirt pocket, looked at it and noticed multiple messages: voice and text. He swung his head twice in disbelief. Then said: "Well you may have other souls to convert and I have to answer to my wife and our friends."

Getting the message, Father Mancini stood up. Edmund just murmured the word *souls*. He seldom used this or similar words in typical conversations. However, this was not a typical conversation.

"Well, I'm elated for having been exposed to small but real miracles. Of course, Sam -- like the miracle with you -- anything can be expected."

"It is not a big deal. I enjoyed talking with you."

Edmund Conrad nodded in some sort of agreement with the priest's thinking, then asked: "Can we exchange e-mail addresses? Do you e-mail?" He got a yes nod. "I also did enjoy your company and hospitality. And above all, now our being touched by Sam."

"Indeed, Sam has that talent and God given vocation. It was a blessing meeting you and I shall have a word with Hawkins once we meet again in two weeks."

"Do that. My wife and I are set to have dinner with him next week before we depart to Chicago. I'll grill him. Starting with a lie --- all about the homeless in San Francisco."

"Yes, homeless in the City by the Bay."

Before leaving Father Mancini's place, Edmund opened his wallet and extracted two fifty-dollar bills. "Look here. Please put this in Sam's treasury. Don't tell him a thing. You can do that, can't you?"

"Of course. On the other hand, I have a better idea. I will go out with Sam, check his work and buy a couple hamburgers for us, with French fries and coke."

"You're funny. Unlike Hawkins."

"By the way, before I let you go, where and how did you find Sam? Was he begging?"

"Not really. It was around one of these streets crossing Market and Mission. Like now, the afternoon was warm. There were lots of beggars; some did not look good at all."

"Never mind, you and I broke the ice. Tell the truth ... they looked dirty and may have annoyed people. I can take any comments, Conrad."

"Oh, I am not bashful in stating what I feel and what I saw. Many as you stated: disjointed, disconnected from the world. However, Sam was not. Actually, I found him with another fellow, both standing near the corner of those streets. They looked at me, smiling as a matter of fact. As you know, they did not dress like clean folks strolling on the street. Their smile caused me to be brave and ask a question. I was looking for a cigar shop that had been referred to me. They promptly told me where it was. In fact, they said: 'we are going in that direction. Follow us.' And I did; and I found the store. I thanked them and had the courage to ask them if they were homeless. Mind you, I did not ask them if they lived or worked nearby; but if they were homeless..."

"That is ironic. Well, you are a good, honest person, too."

"Thanks. They said they were homeless. At that moment I felt bad and meant to amend my error by fetching for my wallet. They just waited as my twenty-dollar bill caught their joy. Sam said 'please, buy your cigars and then follow us to a MacDonald's, buy us some hamburgers for our brothers that can't move well.' I did buy my stuff and then followed them to a MacDonald's. With twenty-five dollars I bought them over a dozen cheese burgers and bags of fries. The other fellow took the bags and left. I stayed temporarily with Sam until it

was time for me to go. Sam, with his eyes almost wet, thanked me and said: 'you're a good man.'"

"Oh, yes, he can't hide his charm all the time. Good story. Then you handed him the one hundred-dollar bill. Is that it?"

"You got it. As I showed him the bill, he hesitated with the palms of his hands up. Instead he asked me to follow him. I did and did not ask questions. I just let the events take me over. I have no regrets -- none whatsoever."

"Now you have another friend. Thanks for sharing the story. *Arrivederci*," finished Father Mancini. Edmund Conrad just saluted the affable and funny priest.



The story by Herbert Hawkins had concluded; Elvera was full of unusual emotions. "My Lord, my dear Lord. No wonder you are two peas in a pod. That was so wonderful."

"Indeed, we respect and admire each other. We are blessed with Sam, too," said Hawkins.

"No wonder that you both kind of adopted Sam."

"That is a good way to put the matter to a warm rest."

"Well, it is time to go. Walt must be worried, too."

"Are you cooking tonight?" asked Fausto Mancini.

"No way. I am full and we have good left-overs. Walt will not mind."

A Sunday barbeque at Elvera's

Sam takes the bait

As we get older, we also get to be wiser.
One watch costing \$300 dollars reads the same time as one costing \$30.
Being alone in a house of 600 sq. feet is the same as in a
house of 3,000 sq. feet.
I hope that one day your (inner) happiness does not
depend on material things.
It does not matter if you fly first class or economy.
You'll die if the plane falls and crashes.
I believe that when we have friends, people to talk with,
laugh with, sing with, this is happiness.
 -----Pope Francis (?)

Two days before the party at Elvera and Walter's was to take place, Elvera received a large business type envelope with the sender's name of the University of the Bay Area. She was happy but not surprised by such receipt. Before opening the envelope, she suspected it could be a certificate of appreciation for their job at the

students' thesis project. Instead it contained a handwritten note from Professor Eichelberger and six separate sealed white envelopes with the participants individual names. The handwritten note from the professor was very complimentary of her efforts in keeping the participants motivated in their participation. She then opened her own envelope and read a generic typed letter, but enriched with handwritten personal notes from all the six students. The typed letter was rich in compliments and in promises from all students expressing their commitment to deliver professional and personal value during their lifetime. What charmed Elvera most was the many personal handwritten notes from each student had zeroed in on Elvera's own personality and impact on them. *"How thoughtful and dear!"* she thought. Walter got his own envelope once he arrived home. Both felt rewarded beyond belief.

Elvera recalled with joy that two weeks earlier she had followed Walter's urge to finally stage the thought-over invitation for a barbeque type brunch at their home on an early Sunday afternoon. Spouses of the participants would be invited as well. Herbert had said, and Fausto agreed, they would persuade Sam and Randolph to also come. Fausto even triggered some laughs as he volunteered to pray and cajole Sam to come – two actions in the same motion. Karen Summers had said she and her husband would not miss such an awesome gathering and the possibility of valuable debriefing, as she claimed her previous research expeditions would benefit by the experience gained from the project. Thus, Elvera counted with her fingers how many would join on that late Spring, early Sunday afternoon celebration. If everybody would come, she estimated a number close to a dozen. Herbert and Fausto would take a pass on travelling by BART; instead, Herbert planned to drive with his wife

and Fausto, and perhaps Sam, if he finally succumbed to Elvera's bait. Elvera and Walter were excited as a crowd of that size would make the matter far better -- not too many neither too few.

Elvera and Walter were experienced hosts for a rowdy crowd of their large family of two daughters, one son, and their spouses and five grandchildren -- a cozy and self-serve crowd. Small gatherings of two to three couples were the other homogenous crowd, where simple menu discussions found collective agreement. However, a diversified crowd as the one on the agenda, posed some challenges that required better thinking. Not even Walter's golf buddies or other types of food - grilling aficionados would trigger any special treatment. They were at times noisy and happy fellows.

"Vera, cooking for this well mixed but small crowd will be a breeze. Don't know their tastes but couldn't care less. What we have for them could also satisfy the Bishop."

"Bishop? When was the last time you did that? Fed a Bishop? Father Lukas, yes."

"Not at home, but when we helped the Knights of Columbus on a fund-raising party. The Bishop was there. As far as I know, someone claimed the Bishop ate well."

"Why not eat well and enjoy good food? Bishops are human, have bodies begging for nourishment. Did you expect them to fast, to be party-poopers, or show-offs?"

"Honey, don't take me so seriously! That was in jest."



Max arrived with his wife, Katheryn; the first to show their faces. Right after were Karen and her husband Arthur Summers. Max was prompt in introducing Katheryn to Karen and then to Arthur. The two couples quickly became no strangers. Arthur said that he was thrilled to come to meet the happy, down-to-earth human being, who could also tell good jokes. Walter took the compliment and proceeded to shake it off with just mild smiles. Instead, he invited Arthur and the arrived guests for some drinks -- whatever was in the ice chests and on the tables.

"Walt, go easy on the drinks. Our guests just arrived and let's take care of other things first," pontificated Elvera.

"Okay!!! As usual, you have the first and the last word," answered Walter. "In this case, fellows, once you are finished with Vera's niceties join me near the grill. Isn't that right?" The friends nodded yes and waited for Vera's house cleaning instructions.

After Elvera staged the house tour, the guests arranged their seating on the patio not too far from the grilling assembly on an "L" shape granite counter. Besides a five-burner grill, a rotisserie skewer completed the grilling toy -- Walter's favorite grilling tool. The counter assembly sported a bar sink on top, a small refrigerator under the counter, space saver cabinets to house a trash can and grilling utensils, and other conveniences. The yard was large, with simple garden architecture whose accents leaned more on efficiency than looks. The grounds were covered either with decorated concrete or clay tiles for orientation and concrete slabs were positioned to lend company to tree and flower pots. The tree pots were of concrete aggregate, but large and deep enough to offer small fruit trees a good habitat. A large and rectangular patio cover was strategically positioned away from the grilling area and almost in line with the family and entertainment room. Under the patio cover, one could see

and enjoy the comfort of sectional patio furniture. All were rattan items, consisting of one large lounge sofa, two chairs with ottomans and one coffee table. A portable gas heater was creatively standing at the corner of the sheltered patio. The sets of patio tables and chairs, made of polished wrought iron, spread themselves harmoniously in the various sections of the yard. Anyone with good knowledge of Elvera and Walter's living style could relate the outside living to their personality -- nice, harmonious, clean and efficient. There was no pool that could entertain their children, grandchildren, or even guests. A surprise that when explained, gained the approval of the visitors. The hosts feared safety issues, which they preferred not to manage. A good size and efficient jacuzzi surrounded by Japanese vegetation did the swimming honors instead.

Katheryn chose Vodka with cranberry juice, also a favorite of Elvera. Max took a Corona and Karen joined her husband with glasses of Chardonnay. Walter followed Max's choice. Actually, Walter had almost consumed his Corona. The ice tub was full to the brim.

"Dear friends, we planned for a fun gathering and good food and drink. Vera showed you our modest home and I showed you the way to the fountain of joy. This first serving of drinks is on the house. The others are on your own?! Relax, 'on-your-own' means you will take care of yourselves from this point forward. If your men are the old-fashioned types, they'll take care of their ladies. Vera will take care of herself." He chuckled as the others laughed. "You'll stay thirsty by your own choice. Therefore, don't hesitate to serve yourselves."

"Don't listen to Walt. He always makes this noise. He is a peach and will make your drinks with gladness. However, he has a point -- please feel at home; we have a nice afternoon ahead of us."

A good size tray of avocado slices topped with olives, pickles and roasted red peppers was on display, together with trays of assorted cheeses and smoked salmon. Little slices of roasted sourdough bread brushed with fine olive oil and crackers were tucked in well decorated and Spanish-themed trays. The Betancourt's really knew how to entertain a la middle-class style -- Walter's only class he knew. No upper class or no tailgate entertainment. That was reserved for A's tailgate parties.

The early arrivals -- not really early-birds -- had arrived around the time suggested. The others, for one reason or another, were still at least thirty minutes away. Herbert was not an overly cautious driver. Yet, this part of the Bay Area was not his friendly repetitive destination. Even on a Sunday. Actually, the guests claimed that Castro Valley was in the middle of a safe and easy to find destinations; on the crossroads of three well-travelled highways -- 580 to 80, 880 and a few miles away from 680. Elvera already knew that Randolph would be a no-show. And Sam opted to come by himself via stopping in Oakland in order to check on his missionaries of the street under the stars near the freeway underpasses of downtown Oakland. Actually, Sam's connections and homeless empire extended to the East Bay and some east Contra Costa communities. Elvera, although the hero in cajoling Sam to also show up and rub shoulders with other human beings, thought that her prayers had not been strong enough to nudge the good Lord to perform another miracle on the go.

"Sorry folks. We have some guests dropping off their intentions in having a good time with us."

"Who is not coming or who is coming late?" asked Max.

"We knew by yesterday, that Herbert's wife, ironically also named Katheryn, could not come as they were surprised with last-minute out-of-town guests. Herbert has said that, no matter what, he would come and claimed out-of-town guests were no match for us. We also knew from Fausto that Randolph would not come. That's it. If Sam – the miracle-in-progress – comes, we will ask for the details."

"Really, too bad. For I was dreaming of meeting this modern-day Mother Teresa," said Karen.

"Not only do we feel like an illusion, meeting and chatting with this good man, but Randolph and Sally as well." reiterated Elvera. "I have faith he'll show up. This time he will."

Max added that he barely knew Sam through the three or so events where Sam was cast as the winner of the good Samaritan or "Be-a-Difference-Rainbow" foundation winner. He was real and at the same time an enigmatic fellow. "From what Fausto tells, Sam is letting his guard soften a bit. In fact, we well remember his most recent thank-you speech had far more words and creative messages than his three-worded thank you on the year before."

"Yes, you are right. When I spoke with Fausto at length, confirming who was coming or not, Fausto said that Sam's aging is finally modifying his stance. He claims that Sam has concluded he cannot do it all. Make no mistake; he'll never change his living environment for anything even remotely close to ours. Never! But he also concedes that feeding his buddies with food and protection and, ... and preaching 'get off-drugs,' is a task that is slowly running its course."

"Thanks, Vera," said Arthur. "Sam's world is so distant from ours." Elvera nodded in agreement. "Even Karen tells me what she has learned from you. Can you add more?"

"Of course, I can. Being with him, even for a short time, for he is always looking to escape us, does not trigger tears. But afterwards, reviewing his heroics (he never says it is heroics) he claims with such candor that *if I do this it is because I can ... and I did it. It's not a big deal!*" Feeling inner emotion taking hold of her, Elvera stopped, rubbed her eyes with her right hand and proceeded: "*It is never out of my way. I love sharing the little I possess. For my buddies, it is more than what they have.*" That is a typical phrase of his."

"Wow!!! So, Fausto, the priest, is his guide, his spiritual guide," continued Arthur.

"Fausto fills that role and more. However, both barely entertain long chats. They see each other almost every day; yet, Fausto respects Sam's aloofness. Almost like the aloofness of a businessman. Fausto, a very happy and gregarious servant of the church, thinks the chemistry is in the actions, the mutual trust, and the space in between them."

"So, he depends on Fausto for guidance and material stuff. What else?" inserted Katheryn.

"Let me see what I remember well. Sam needs no guidance, no help or no nothing. Fausto met him years ago, many years ago when Fausto did rounds through the Tenderloin, in downtown San Francisco. He met Sam, exchanged some odd or casual talk; and then they stuck with each other like glue. But this is what glue did – acceptance of each other – with no agreements. Once Sam calculated Fausto was real, he sought the most discrete way to connect with him as needed. Again, actions spoke volumes. Fausto was happy and let his luck roll and roll; until Sam sought Fausto to hold his money from begging. By then, and this perhaps gleaned from Fausto's shrewd covert tactics, Sam gave up drugs. What followed was a natural progress in achieving moderate but measurable success. Money grew

to support the buying of food and other stuff the homeless need daily." All were enjoying the little Vera knew and shared. Sensing that, Vera continued. "Sam being clean of drugs, allowed him to apply his own medicine on others. That is, he started a silent crusade to diminish drug trafficking and drug use. Money saved, needed to be kept. Where? Bank accounts? Handling a bank account would be too complicated for Sam, too messy, at least at that junction."

Turning to his wife, Max said: "Fausto acts as the banker."

"How nice. Everybody wins," concluded Katheryn.

"Indeed, Katheryn. This is the typical saga of success begetting success," affirmed Elvera.

"Another question: besides what you said, how does Sam operate?" asked Arthur.

"Nowadays, Sam, with his contacts in our foundation, like Herbert Hawkins, the Lutheran minister, was granted a room in a shelter run by the Lutherans. At first, he refused to use it for his own convenience. Later on, he relented and finds some rest there between his errands in his territory." Elvera paused while the others processed the new emerging good news. "All of these factors, almost unspoken, are breaking Sam's barriers of personal insulation."

"Thus, he promised to join you today and mingle like a brother with us," stated Karen.

"You've got it. It nudged him to respect us the same way we respect his freedom. No guilt feelings. Just the notion that we value him as much as his friends value him. There is no interference on his mission, if it is a mission. I told him: we all can be of value to one another. Or like employees, at times, influence bosses."

"You said that? Like a motivation moment?" retorted Arthur.

"Just like that." Now turning to Max: "you don't mind me saying this; but I chose an appropriate moment of solitude and asked God to

intervene, not for pride but to expand His reach.” She held her tears. “And, He delivered. Unless we get a call from Sam saying he had to help someone in need. But I did my part; the rest belongs to God.”

All got up and walked around the yard. Walter thought that Herbert and Fausto would be arriving soon. Indeed, the doorbell rang at the door, bringing their attention towards the house.

“Halleluiah. You arrived, and no Sam!” blurted Elvera.

“No Sam, but he will come. He said he will. He called me from the train and needed someone to pick him up. I do not know the station and we did not want to come late. Thus, when he arrives someone needs to get him,” stated Fausto.

“I will do that.” said Arthur. “I want to benefit from the miracle.” Upon being asked about the station, Arthur said: “I know the station quite well. Just ensure he knows what I look like.”



Fausto and Herbert greeted the other guests. Herbert said: “It is good to have female guests in this gathering -- like you -- Karen and Katheryn. I feel bad my wife could not come.”

Katheryn retorted: “I hope Max keeps me in the loop. I heard so much about you folks that benefits my transition into the retirement age.” Max, Fausto, Herbert and Arthur gave notice they still worked for a living. Karen dismissed her almost faux pas.

“Welcome; welcome.” said Elvera. Then added, “Walt, we can do this again; can’t we? Like having another barbeque party soon?”

“We can do this again or give them the keys to the house -- like an Airbnb thing. Without fees!” Those who heard Walter’s joke felt it

was too intellectually funny -- thus laughing their lungs and hearts out.

"What happened?" asked Herbert. "I did not hear the joke."

"Never mind, Herb. That was another one from Walt," finished Max.



"Where can I help? I know Arthur... that is your name ... right?" Arthur nodded yes and Herbert continued. "Arthur is picking up Sam. Sam knows what you look like. Don't ask questions. Act normal."

"What's the fuss? We both are human beings. Right?"

Herbert replied with no hesitation. "I apologize for the quick advice. But there is a reason for me saying that. We all tend to be kind and useful. Patronization comes along with our manners." All were still puzzled. "If he talks, talk too; if he does not say a word, say nothing. Once he gets here, we ambush him. Get it?"

"The way you put it or place him, it is quite like talking with a nerd from Mars. I will do my part. Don't worry fellows; I will pretend not to ruin the party."

"Sorry, Arthur if I hurt your feelings. It was not meant to. However, it is proper that someone like you -- he does not know -- picks him up. Sorry again!"

"Don't worry. I understand or understood in a few exchanges that in spite of this man's great deeds there is a caveat. I will remember it, for I want to meet this man up close."

Arthur departed for a twenty-minute round trip to the Bart station in Castro Valley. The others joined Walter and shared in his good assortment of liquor; though the men preferred wine and beer

and his great zingers. Walter was in great spirits because he felt at home with this new set of friends and acquaintances. *Change is good for you*, he mumbled to himself.

"Let me see ... Sam is converted and Randolph is gone or will be gone." Said Walter. "You are a miracle Father Mancini. It was due to happen. It was due."

"Walt, if my memory serves me well, I am going to use an analogy -- the gospel you used with the professor. Do you remember that scene when you reprimanded the professor?"

"No, I do not remember it. I had to be drunk then..."

"I know you remember; you're just pulling my leg. The point here is that we never do or achieve something big alone. Others, named or invisible, play roles in the transformation of something big, something impactful. Everyone plays a role. However, Sam played a role on his own, still to be proven transformation. This must have been achieved based on the experiences with himself as much as with us. Granted, we did provide help with altruistic purposes and honorable ideas."

Fausto continued. "You called me Father Mancini, didn't you?" Walter said he did. "What was the deal?"

"Because I respect you a lot beyond being friends. That is all."

"Okay, Mr. Betancourt, I respect and admire you as well. Calling me Fausto sounds a lot better."

"You're right. We are even."

"Good idea. Now to Sam ... let's have him feel the comfort of something that he was far from being a part of. Let him find his place in this gathering. I plan to have a good time and Walt is a good cook and Vera is tops on the list. Let's celebrate some good things in life. What do you say Max? You brought your wife, too. What a treat. What a gift, Katheryn!"

Katheryn smiled but stayed motionless. Max displayed just pure pride.

Father Mancini continued and directed his comments to all. "I am going to have a drink. You, Herb, just drink wine and not much more. You'll do the driving and need to stay sober. We cannot afford to have the police fine two members of the church, including an emissary of Mother Teresa." He paused and then said: "Thanks, Vera for staging this thing."

"It was not my idea. It was Walt's."

"Then let's drink to Walt. Everyone, lift your glasses!"

"Did you drink anything before we came, Fausto? Too much wine in church? If it is, no more booze for you." exclaimed Pastor Hawkins.

"I guess we are in a great mood for chatting and drinking. Walt already preached the command that we have to help ourselves to drinking. He did the first serving. Now, can you tell us something about Randolph? His going away from Sam and San Francisco?" asked Max.

"I can, but I prefer Sam to tell it. It may help his motivation to share. It is a good theme and a necessary answer. Can we do that? Wait for him?" All agree they could and would.



"What do you consider a good theme in the Catholic Church?" asked Arthur.

"Nothing about the sins of my Church! March-Madness is over, University of Virginia won, the Giants continue to flounder in their

home opener, the Warriors are hot. I know, I know Walt loves his A's. Anything A's and Raiders!"

"Well, if one is serious about religion, the Catholic Church exists because there are sins and sinners. The way I read the gospels that Jesus preached, He came to the world because of the sinners; the others were already on their way to heaven. Don't you agree? They had purchased their tickets. Right?" Max, the agnostic who had read more books about religions, talked with authority and not sarcasm, they surmised.

Fausto intervened; he had to, for he had started the hinted themes. "For those that do not know Max, may find his statement ironic or wrapped in sarcasm. For you, Karen and Arthur, Max has read more material on religion than Herb and I have done in preparation to become religious servants. He did that for different reasons; yet he did it. Now, about the Catholic Church and its sins, it is a fact that makes me pause and dig for valid answers. And since we had that meeting with students of Theology, Philosophy, etc. last month talking about the Catholic Church is no mystery. Yes, we have sinned in many ways -- in the past, not distant past and in the present. It keeps us humble, at least it should."

It was a lengthy confession that others felt free to talk about. Katheryn took the first step. "Fausto, I know about you, logically from Max. Likewise he admires you for being authentic. I am not a professed Agnostic but respect my husband and follow him. However, I can think and make decisions by and for myself. For instance, I know enough about the Catholic Church. Particularly since your Pope John ... yes, the XXIII, the nice round face chubby Pope, your church has become more open, more gregarious. You made tons of progress towards conciliations not only to other religions but to the world itself. You have and continue to permeate in the life of society --

modern and old society -- by your hands in many facets of life. At every turn we read about Catholics here, and Catholics there. You deliver a tremendous amount of religious vibrancy in many things you do."

Katheryn stopped and then asked if she was extending herself so much, like invading dangerous territory. She got the message that her inspired words should be said. "Good, thanks. However, the ugly moment or stage you are suffering from is also of your own. I mean the sex scandals caused by bad priests, human beings that commit sins, the way you describe grave errors. We all make mistakes. Everybody does. So, the church through transactions in matters of the spirit, of some sort of divinity, are also run by humans. And we know what humans are and do at times. In part your faithful think that by dressing in special clothes and displaying special collars, you would become saints on the go. That is the problem that the faithful mismanage -- expectations from you and none from them."

"You are so correct, Katheryn," replied Fausto. "This in part should be told to our parishioners. Many have this illusion that we are or are supposed to be saints -- all the time. The other thing I agree is that we should be accountable and held to a higher level, higher standards. No tip toeing around... and should get out when we mismanage our mission."

"I agree," added Herbert. "We should be held to higher examples."

"Now that you allowed me to go on, let me add a few ironic remarks," asserted Katheryn. "Pedophilia is bad because it deals with minors, mostly innocent and green young people. It is violating their innocence, their trust. However, it happens in all sectors of society. I suppose in more segments of society than in the Catholic Church, particularly in schools, particularly in the schools' sports activities; as

well as within families. You name it. But listen to me on this point. I am going to make a comparison with a large banking institution I worked for twenty plus years. Yes, the big Bank of America. The comparison is back in the late seventies and early eighties.”

She caught her breath and looked at the listeners with keen attention. They had reciprocated with obvious curiosity. “During that period, banks -- all banks -- were consolidating operations at a fast pace. Like closing branch units, buying smaller banks or merging with larger institutions. Bank of America, being the biggest then, was in the middle of this fever; yet, they moved very slowly. Wells Fargo Bank, BofA’s nemesis, took no prisoners, and led on the changes. And, by that, they became the darling of Wall Street. Are you seeing where I am going? Like comparing Bank of America, an original and vibrant institution, ubiquitous to the core, with the Catholic Church? Both huge and with enormous presence; yet slumbering along.”

“Here is the comparison: At that time, Wells Fargo Bank identified what areas, what branches to consolidate or close. In two years, they had their plan executed to perfection. They received a lot of bad press and moved on. BofA, instead must have done the same research and developed an action plan. However, they did in installments, like during eight to ten years, and got bad press for that long. Can you see the agony and the time wasted? Wells Fargo did it quickly and zipped through the market place with very few scars. BofA? Well, you get the picture.”

“The way I match your comparisons is that the Catholic Church should have handled the problem with pedophilia like Wells Fargo Bank with branch closures! Quickly and with determination,” interjected Pastor Hawkins.

“Exactly! The Catholic Church, throughout the world, because they are so global, should have recognized that too much smoke had

to have come from real fires.” Katheryn paused, and turning to Father Mancini, asked: “when did this thing of pedophilia in the church start?” Fausto said it was at the turn of the century. “Here we go; we are talking about over a dozen years. And now the other parts of the world are surfacing with the bad news. By the time this finishes, it is like an eternity. It is like the priests’ scandals are on-going events.”

“I told you Fausto,” said Herbert. “The reformation is over, over four-hundred years old. Now, your church is taking another beating; instead they should, as Katheryn said, have addressed the problem right away, admitted they made mistakes, dealt with it, made reparations, fixed and got it over with. I have come to admire the Catholic Church -- so universal and relevant.”

“Thanks Herb. I know and I pain from the matter. Still the Church is lucky, very lucky. Although there have been some exaggerations, there are many cases or examples that have not come to the surface. Many of the abused never filed charges. They most likely suffered, dealt with the pain, and then moved on with their lives. I fear more for the number that did not come out with their sufferings and legitimate complaints. Well, God will help. But we must do better.”

“Thanks, Katheryn, for such dramatic but very useful enlightenment,” concluded Elvera. “Okay, let’s choose another subject. Walt is right, we must refresh our glasses and enjoy the appetizers.”

“It was my pleasure! I have admiration for the Catholic Church.”

Noise came from the side yard gate. Arthur and Sam had shown up -- happy.



"Welcome dear Sam. You look good. And thanks for joining us."

Sam did look good -- a far cry from homeless attire. Nothing upscale -- whether casual or outdoor party dressing. His pants were of a faded and worn corduroy grey, matched by a black "V-neck" sweater, also faded with grey sneakers. He brought no cap to cover his head, still showing healthy dark and sandy hair now cut almost crew cut style; with subtle voids on the side. Perhaps someone of his homeless nation must have cut it at a YMCA bathroom. His beard was noticeably two weeks old, equally revealing shades of grey. He had turned sixty-two; thus, his posture was indicative of any man that age. He looked somewhat less old than when doing his thing at his environment. He was presentable; meaning he respected his invitation as one good guest would.

Sam directed himself towards Walter. Both, spontaneously, greeted each other with their right-hand knuckles and laughed. A greeting the other guests took notice. Sam then glanced at the other guests spread around the terrace. Elvera, seeing the guests almost begging for a good transition to introductions, said: "Okay you all know Sam or heard of him. Let's introduce ourselves to him so that he can feel at home. Can we do that?" Everyone nodded with relief. "So, let's start with the folks guarding the grill and booze in the bar area." All beckoned with gusto, including Sam.

"Well, I started and I introduced myself to Sam already as I picked him up at the station. By the way, Herb, good description of me. Sam had no fears jumping in the car. He guessed he was not being kidnapped." Herbert offered a contrite smile. "One more time, my name is Arthur Summers." Elvera waved Arthur to complete the introduction. "Am I supposed to say what I do for a living?"

Elvera telegraphed a sure yes. "I am an attorney by trade; family law and preparing myself for the transition to the good life of retirement within a few more years."

Elvera was all smiles with Arthur's long introduction. "Thanks Arthur!"

Next, and near the grill, was Father Mancini. Fausto waived his right hand and said "Hi!"

Next, the grill master followed suit with his held right hand and said "Hi, here."

Elvera, following the circle, just smiled and passed her turn to Herbert, who prompted the same greeting as Fausto. Karen was effusive with her smile at Sam and said: "My name is Karen Summers; married to that gentleman over there, preparing himself to invade my territory. Don't you think so? Like Vera and Walt? Both semi-retired are invading each other's space -- time and real space." Elvera dismissed Karen's truth and hinted for her to tell what she did. "Okay; I am a free-lance writer, get paid to do what I do and perhaps I will write about the professor's project and this gathering today. No, I do not take pictures. I will, but will not share them at all."

"You better not; unless we consent," said Max.

After the laughing and the teasing came Katheryn's turn. "My name is Katheryn and married to this lovely man; yes, on my right. I was in the retail banking business for over twenty years and now I am a permanent consultant to a laborers' retirement fund; that is, making sure their savings are responsibly managed and invested."

"Hi, I am Max and like all of us, proud to know Sam. He is someone to be proud of; it is an honor being around him." Tears were about to run from all guests' eyes. Sam just looked down towards the ground.

"Very good, very good. Now that we know each other, let's make the train run. Walt will explain how we stage the grilling. Some of you already savored his grilled sausages. Help yourselves with more of the other appetizers and drinks, too. Remember, help yourselves." Turning to Sam she asked him what he wanted to drink. Sam chose coke and fetched one from the ice bucket near Walter. "Now, Sam, join me in the kitchen. Okay, Sam?" Sam did not wait a second; he promptly followed Elvera.

Walter explained how the barbecue would evolve. "I have here four glass trays with the items to be grilled. You see ... the typical vegetables for grilling, which includes cut pineapple, a tray with small cuts of chicken breasts and thighs, another one with seafood, like scallops and tiger prawns, and another with cuts of pork loin. I have here two bowls of liquid dressing and two canisters of dry herbs; also, garlic salt and pepper if desired. Got it?"

"I do not get it, Walt," said Max.

"Okay, Max, you are new to my grilling, and I will explain." The others were relieved that a genuine explanation would surface. "Other than grilling hamburgers and hot dogs, all of us have different taste buds. All of you can create your grilling items by using these skewers --- bamboo skewers." The teacher was getting the students' attention. "You will prepare your own or tell me what you wish. Or I may grill, individually, all items and then you will choose what you want, afterwards."

"For instance," said Herbert, "I can choose a skewer with the fish and the vegetables or wait for you to grill all separately and then we can serve ourselves?"

"I guess we are getting there. Anyone with the same idea?" said Walter.

"In this case I will choose what Herb chose but with chicken instead. Can you make my skewer with chicken and vegetables?" voiced Katheryn. Walter said it was fine and doable.

The others, including Max, Fausto, Arthur and Karen instructed Walter to grill the items separately and then avail themselves of the good stuff as they pleased, possibly a piece of each. Walter said that was a good choice.

Meanwhile Elvera was explaining to Sam what she had to accompany the grilled items. "I've baked lima beans with celery, mushrooms and thinly cut carrots. I added some cubed tomatoes just to give color. I also have in the oven ..." Elvera opened the large gas oven "... ten ears of corn on the cob, you can see, nicely wrapped in foil paper, which I previously rubbed with a little salt, pepper and butter." Sam was happy for he guessed that Elvera would give him chores.

"Can I help you in any way, Mrs. Betancourt?"

Elvera thought that the progress she had achieved with Sam should be extended to other areas. "Sam, look at me. If you call me Mrs. Betancourt, I will call you Mr. Williams. Can you see?" Sam said he comprehended. "Call me Vera and I will call you Sam. Is this a deal?" Sam reluctantly agreed, stating it would be difficult for his habits had been ingrained for years. Elvera said: "Just try, Sam. Just try. Okay?"

"Mrs...., I am sorry, V...era, it will take time for me to get used to calling you by your first name." Regrouping himself he said "this is a very nice and big house. Your family must come here often."

"Sam this is a good house, built on more than one-acre lot. We purchased it thirty years ago and had practically no neighbors. Now we have nothing but new developments. Walt added almost two thousand square feet, up and around, added an adjacent two car

garage and a small workshop. He likes to entertain himself with his hands. You know, besides playing golf." Sam was excited with the warm and logical explanations coming from Elvera.

"The outside is large, nicely decorated and built. I am happy for you. You are a very nice lady."

"Thanks Sam. Beyond the patio and fun area, we have about a half-acre in the back separated by a latticed fence, which is also separated by shrubbery. There, Walt grows his vegetables. He loves to grow his own legumes. He spends hours and hours. There is a garden tool shed nicely surrounded by fruit trees."

"Thank you, Vera for the explanation. I also remember my grandpa's little plot in Southern Georgia. I loved hoeing with him." Tears came to Sam's eyes. Elvera turned away for he remembered his grandpa and said little about his mother and father or the rest of his family.

"Sam, you can join the guests. I will ask you to help me when the rest is ready. Okay?"

"I prefer to see the vegetable garden. Can I do that instead? Call me when you need me. Okay?" Elvera was happy Sam was finding bridges to his past. She thanked the Lord.



The guests were already finding their niches -- spread around two patio dining tables and/or keeping company to Walter who dazzled them with stories about his A's and Raiders. They knew his golf scores were high, although he took the accolades in stride.

Elvera came from the kitchen with a large white business type envelope. All looked at her and at the envelope she was waving.

"Folks, please pay attention to something very important I have for you. This envelope, from professor Eichelberger, arrived here last Friday afternoon. It was addressed to me and, when I opened it, I found individual envelopes for each one of us that participated in the students' thesis project."

"Wow! How nice. What else?" asked Karen.

"Oh, a letter from the professor saying I was so good and smart by influencing you all to be good Samaritans. Am I not smart? Like Walt?" Walter laughed almost to the point of choking. She continued. "Just a thank you from him. Why don't you open your own envelopes, read the message and decide if we should have some kind of debriefing?"

Elvera distributed all of the envelopes. All appeared very concentrated in the reading – one time, a second time and then lifted their heads towards Elvera. She then said: "So, what do you think? Any reason to say anything? Or drink and debrief?"

Karen broke the silence. "I like what these young people did. Very classy. However, I see no value in any kind of debriefing. It appears that what happened was good; the students valued our input and now they show credible gratitude. I'd rather learn more about ourselves and validate Walt's great cooking. Well, it is just my opinion."

Max kind of seconded the motion as if it was a motion on a real meeting and waived his glass of wine. The others nodded agreement with a thumbs-up approval -- a definite sign that, the motion by Karen, passed.

Fausto added. "How about you Mr. Chef Walt? Anything different?"

Walter thought over and then said. "Vera gave me the letter when I came home last Friday. I read it, thought about the various handwritten messages on that kind of official stationery and I felt good, emotionally good. First class! The guy who asked me the first question was very thoughtful. I like that young man." Walt stopped, wiped his cheeks with the edge of his hand and stayed unusually pensive. The others dared not to question him further.

Elvera intervened. She went to the kitchen and returned with Walter's letter. "Well, that young man that Walt almost scared the pants out of, wrote an emotional message." She proceeded in reading it: "I would love to adopt you as my grandfather. I never knew my maternal grandfather and the paternal one was not that kind to me. Thus, I learned nothing from either. You could inspire me in life. You are so lovely raw and credible. The world is better because of folks like you. Thanks grandpa."

"Let me start my grilling. My debriefing is done," said Walter.

"Certainly, we are done. We all behaved as '*Be a difference rainbow*' members," concluded Max.

"Thanks, people. Let's resume the fun." Said Elvera.

They all walked towards their chosen spots and proceeded to restart the fun.

"Max, I learned that your grandfather was an Atheist and activist in labor causes," started Karen politely in her desire to know and create solid intellectual talk. She also felt that Max was a good un-parochial dialoguer, as her friend Elvera had hinted one time.

"Yes, yes and no. Let me explain. He was not an open activist but supporter and representative of laborers' causes. He fought for workers causes, for labor relations justice. As an Atheist, from the first time I understood these labels -- religious, Atheist, oblivious to

religion, not caring about anything socialism, or just anything, I followed him as an obedient but silent atheist. I guess I followed with my heart. I remember him always bragging about the value of Atheism, in relation to capitalism versus communism. By then I would come to understand that there were two sides.”

“Sorry for invading territory that is more a private than open field. However, if you don’t mind, can you elaborate?” Karen asked.

“Not at all.” Max offered a mild smile, was happy to entertain conversation on a matter dear to him; and in this case, it was with an interlocutor that was credentialed in exploring human life and substantive human stories. In fact, he liked her on the first day they were together on that joint project -- the professor and his students research for exam thesis. “I love and always find satisfaction in clearing up what I view being and existing some misconceptions. My grandfather loved me a lot and thought I would be a follower of his doctrine.” Karen smiled happily. “However, observing and enjoying my father and my mother’s neutral views and my Uncle Fredrick’s way of living, I decided to love him back, but not to espouse his culture. For instance, he was a fan of Karl Marx, but not necessarily of communism as a whole. He felt communists were brutal and meant to exercise excessive power over the masses as much as capitalism exercised economic power by deception. So, fighting for workers’ rights only occurred on neutral ground.”

By then, Fausto and Herbert had joined the conversation. Walter was happy with his beer and seeing the master pieces of his grilling coming to fruition.

“Can you break this in segments?” asked Herbert.

“Yes, I can. Whether you are an Atheist or neutral in anything like religion, what matters for real people who care about their rights, is to fight for these. However, capitalism has a way of misguiding or

misleading people. It finds obstacles, creates economic disparities and then teases people with table crumbs. In Reagan's time, it was taken as "trickle-down" economics or politics. The rich get richer as long as there are some food leftovers for the workers, for the bottom line of society. Can you see the point? Certainly, I am exaggerating the reality for there are many, many people in business that do the right thing. And these are never targeted by activism. Justice must be made here. Nevertheless, let me tell you ..." Max stopped to rearrange his thesis ... "for those of you who remember economics in school must recall Adam Smith's theory on capitalism." Most gave an affirmative nod. "If Adam Smith would return from the grave, he would be appalled by the deceit of the economic and financial powerhouses at the moment. His doctrine of free capital was meant to involve everyone and not the elite -- the manipulators of value and money. Smith felt if capitalism or free markets were done right, all classes would benefit, and the tide would rise for all -- for all." Max stopped and then said: "I want to answer Karen's question about my grandfather and not about politics. Otherwise, she is going to think I am an agitator. I have enough labels that I want socialism in America. As if socialism is an evil term. Americans love labels."

"Go ahead Max. We know you well, and we admire you. You are a noble American. Answer Karen's concern," interjected Fausto.

"Thanks, Fausto. About my grandfather, the question was that his pet peeve was about religion, the existence of God, etc. I have the same issue as he had. I respect religions for they have like everybody else an investment in people's rights and people's well-being." Max paused, then inferred that his uncle Frederick could handle a good quarrel about the matter. Then stated, "he had the same DNA as my grandfather but with opposing views on society, different ways of living. My father, by temperament was docile. End of the talk! I loved

my grandfather as much as he loved me. Still, as I grew to see the world with a different pair of eyes, I politely disavowed my allegiance to his view. He was a good man. That is all I can say.”

“I suspect you want to put an end to this conversation. But the thing of religion which you did not agree with him intrigues me. How did he display his displeasure? Why beat on religion?”

“I understand your question; we could spend the whole afternoon and night on this matter for I was close to him and heard his little sermons on the matter. For instance, and as it relates to the exploitation of human beings, especially, or the working-class in particular; adding value to the acquisition of wealth, I recall phrases like these: religion is a spiritual booze that causes submission; capitalism exploits human beings; or that humans are enslaved by capitalism and then take shelter in religion! In my book this is philosophy. But he was not altogether correct. Because I read of popes, in their encyclicals, lash out at these capitalistic pronouncements. I read them.”

“Indeed, it is philosophy at its best. Unfortunately, the world moves on and the majority of people live on morsels from the tables.” said Karen; then concluded, “Max you’re so fair on your views. Thanks.”

Max gave no clue he would add more to Karen’s apparent conclusion. Karen recharged her beliefs -- “no wonder you folks are such enlightened people. I mean all of you. Look at your differences and how well you respect each other and each other’s view. Amazing! I’d better start drinking out of your fountain of love, respect and intellectual cohesiveness ... Where are you, Vera?” Vera did not answer, she was out of their reach. “Certainly, I will insist that you include me in these matters involving such magnanimous people,” concluded Karen.

"I agree with Karen. The more I learn about you -- from your friends -- the more I find myself on your team. Get me in, too," finished Katheryn.

"The meal is ready," said Elvera, who just showed up after consulting with Walter. "You can see we have two dining tables -- one large that can accommodate six and another -- that round one -- can accommodate four or more. By the grill area counter -- opposite the grill, we can seat four more. However, since we are not a big crowd, perhaps we can occupy the two tables."

Walter washed his hands in the sink, wiped them (under the disapproving look of Elvera) on his apron. Walter nicely waved her off. Then said: "Where is Sam?"

"In your meditation grounds -- your vegetable garden. I'll get him."

"You also have a vegetable garden, Vera?" asked Max.

"I do and I also enjoy it. Walt does all the work -- yard and the vegetable garden. I love my roses and flowers, and pick up the fruit from the trees." She stopped then resumed by saying *I forgot something; what was it?* Ah, it was about Walt's meditation refuge. I can vouch for him. While there, I would occasionally see him talking to himself. And, during summertime ... a couple coronas helped."

"It beats talking to her!" replied Walter. Elvera held her rebuttal back, preferring to gesture something else.

Max laughed and said: "So, you have a plot of land that grows vegetables. That is nice. Is the garden big?"

"Big enough to produce some vegetables year-round. It is almost two thirds of an acre. Go and see after we finish eating."

After Sam retreated from the meditation grounds, and guests chose their places, Elvera hinted for a prayer moment. "Shall we? Not a real prayer but a way to validate this nice gathering."

“Vera, if you’re thinking about us, we love prayers; they do good. Max may have already given you our view on this thing. We are living creatures -- prayers are logical.”

“Thanks, Katheryn. I suggest that our servant Fausto does the honors. Okay Fausto?” asked Elvera.

“Let’s gather and stand in a circle; hold hands and close our eyes. Think about this gathering, about what it has meant to you, about what the gifts of each other mean to each one of us, for we are pure gifts from heaven; think about how you can influence others to choose peace and love instead of rivalry and hate, of how you can be even more significant to others; how you can make a difference as in “Be-a-Difference-Rainbow.” They followed Fausto’s instructions, joined hands and stayed motionless for two minutes. Then Fausto said: “Creator of the world we live and know, send your spirit of creation to us in a more clear and obvious way, so as to validate that we were made in your image. We love what you did; help us to convince others to care more, love and give of themselves more.”

“Thank you, Father Mancini,” said Karen.

“You have a real way with words -- words that convince,” added Katheryn.

Clapping her hands, Elvera concluded: “Let’s eat and talk and be merry!”

The three ladies and Sam sat together at the table of four (or five if they dared to squeeze some space). Sam was happy he was sitting with Elvera. The others had the large patio dining table to themselves.



"Now I believe that your golf score is real. Your cooking or your grilling is superb. Invite me again," said Arthur with convincing joy.

"Can you invite us again?" asked Max. "I had heard before that you were a master at grilling..." Walter did not let Max finish.

"And you did not believe me?!" asked Walter. "Shame, Mr. Bingham!"

"Okay, I should be reprimanded. Try again and I will ask for a 'Michelin' rating. Deal?"

"Max, rating or no rating, you are welcome anytime. Even if you never convert!" exclaimed Walter.

"To what? A good grill-man? Actually, you can grill both ways: on the grill and now you are grilling me. You will succeed when you buy the best bottle of Rioja!" replied Max.

"This is a good start --- a duet of smarts!" entered Herbert on the game of words. "It sounds like Spanish wine, this thing of Rioja. Is that it, Walt?"

"I like Rioja wine. However, being Basque is one thing; being from French Basque is another."

"No kidding, Walt. Two different things!?"

"Yes, my dear Herbert. Still, all wine is good. California leads the way. Let's enjoy the meal as there is lots of food, and the afternoon is so young. I even bet we have ample room to nap or sleep if some of you do not pass the sobriety test." Finished Walter.

"Good idea; can we talk about Sam and Randolph? It is so precious that Sam is here with us. He got attached to Vera," said Arthur.

"This is a miracle, Art!" said Herbert. "Don't you think so, Fausto?"

"I do. Perhaps this is a turning point for Sam. Could this be tied up to Randolph? Could this be a message for him to also take a look

at himself? Could this be a message from God that he cannot carry the world or the world's misery by himself. Or, is it the smarts of these many years of helping others, and teaching others to help others and themselves finally banging at his own door? Or, is the good he does boomeranging on him?" Fausto paused, looked at his interlocutors, and finding nothing but awe, continued ... "It sounds like that I am preaching or found my way to let what I am enjoying this afternoon spill over now. Thanks Walt. Pulling your leg, saying funny things at your grilling talent is one thing. But I will repeat this one thing – the barbeque is awesome," stated Fausto with pleasure.

"Believe me, I was not nervous you guys were coming. I love doing barbeques, and everyone who can do some cooking will not screw up the grilling. I am pleased you are enjoying yourselves. As for me, I am happy listening to your moments of inspiration. Better than some Sunday sermons I hear at times." Father Mancini smiled and looked at the others for consensus. Walter finished his monologue. "Sorry, Fausto. Priests or homilists cannot be at their best all the time. Anyway, tell us some more about Sam."

Max asked a question instead: "Then, Randolph is gone and this may be affecting Sam?!"

"Yes, I think this and perhaps many other events are impacting Sam. Randolph has not gone away yet. He was supposed to go this past week. However, there were other things that delayed them. I even went with Randolph and Randolph's girlfriend to Saint Vincent de Paul in San Francisco to buy things for them, courtesy of the Conference's generous voucher. We bought some additional clothes and two small carry-on bags. The buying caused Sally to get a larger piece of luggage, too. Both are leaving this Tuesday via the old Greyhound bus way. Do you remember the old commercial -- *Go Greyhound and leave the driving to us.!??*" They did remember.

The others smiled broadly and Fausto continued. "Sam is over sixty; he has been doing this business of homelessness and helping homeless folks for over two decades; I think before I even came to San Francisco. Like in any of us, things get old, things get to you, you get frustrated like Mother Teresa may have found moments of stress, of no ending poverty, and then something else, like God saying you need help, you need rest and ... boom! It strikes on your head. I pray that all of this is causing him to process changes in him and his environment. Now, Vera the link. She is a woman ... and bang ... he softens up. Take a look without looking. Can you see how comfortable he is with them? Vera, the link!"

"I don't have my own take, because this is the first time that I am involved with you folks. It sounds like a lot has gone in this man's life and life itself is finding him now. The cycles, I guess." Arthur intervened and the others nodded. "So, the way I've quickly learned is that Randolph helped Sam in helping the other homeless. And, Randolph by moving away is causing changes -- emotional and behavior changes -- in Sam. Can these be life or direction changes in Sam? Can he survive or, like Randolph, cause him to find another venue, another route in his life?"

Herbert tried to answer but then deferred to Fausto. "Well, before I mention Herb's influence in Sam, let me add something that I believe through experience. Just as in real life, when genuine good Samaritans do favors to people, it is like they innocently or in innocuous ways also own a piece of those helped. Sam, by being around us so often, naturally surrenders to realities, softens his way of being active, slowly reveals his ever-concealed emotions. Herb has come to know Sam by virtue of his church sponsoring a shelter; and also, by learning more first hand. Sam acknowledges this; Sam kind of finds that we two, in our own responsibilities as clergymen, are real --

we love what we do. He is finding that loving what he does also has shortcomings, barriers, bad days. It is life being what it is. I don't mind going to the streets to help Sam solve a case. For instance, Herbert helps him in other ways. When they meet at the shelter, he sees Herb naturally adding value."

The others looked at Herbert. While Fausto hesitated, Herbert continued deferring the narrative to him. "What I guess I am seeing now, is that things change, even if the needs for his help do not. He is using his smarts to accomplish perhaps the same things as before. But street needs keep growing, like never ending. Then, his experiences, he tells me, reveal that not all homeless people are the same, not all have the same needs, or agree to be helped in a logical way. Remember, the homeless world is similar to your and my world -- give or take an inch. It is so vast or so identical, for humans are humans. I don't think I answered your question, Art. Sorry."

"You did, because this is a world that passes by us; other than the news we read. We know very little about it. It is like their world does not exist if parallel with our society."

"Art you said something I meant to include in my homily. I said if needed I would be on the street with Sam for some rescue. I would and I will. Still, after that, I will be able to come to my own bed and have a cup of tea. Like returning to my comfort zone -- some qualified comfort, but comfort."

"Outstanding narrative, Fausto. Now, on Sam but on a trivial note. Do you still act as Sam's bank, holding his money?" asked Max.

"Oh, no. Actually, it happened only for a short period of time. I got a checking account for him free of monthly charges. I saw an ad in the paper that one regional bank was offering checking accounts with no service charges for life and got one for him. He is disciplined with the management of ins and outs and consults me. And, about the

deal of safe keeping his money, I told him that in spite of the Catholic Church being so friendly, one had to avoid appearances of impropriety. He understood it. And another thing -- Sam also makes money besides the small benefits from the City. His side jobs are indicative of the respect he gets from downtown people."

"Such as what?" asked Arthur.

"Such as a downtown courier -- carrying packages from one firm to another. There are a ton of small legal firms, small investment advisors and other niches. The Internet even with emails and faxes are not enough. That is sweet money on the side. His work in downtown San Francisco is faster than UPS."

"I get it. So, what is next after Randolph is gone?" asked Walter.

"Sam is making good use of the shelter, as a day overseer? Isn't that it, Herb?" Herb nodded. "He still visits the streets; finds homeless people he can convert to good habits -- like from drugs. Drug users are tough to handle because the users lie all the time. But he helps transient homeless and directs them to move on to the outer areas in the Bay Area or comforts them with words. He will find someone to fill Randolph's void. He will. Yet difficult, for Randolph, who is twenty years younger than him, was a real find. Three years with Sam, both would clean dozens of people a year; they were that good. Sam will find a replacement; it will take time. He is patient now."

"Let's stretch our legs. I am going to see your vegetable garden," claimed Max.

"Go, get some green beans and fava beans. They are about ready. Vera will get you a bag." Walter replied.



Meanwhile the ladies were having a ball with Sam. "Your friend Randolph is leaving you. You will miss him." Said Karen.

"I will. But he is doing the right thing; he has helped many people."

"He is much younger than you; however, I thought he was hooked on you," stated Elvera.

Sam added, "that is true and also the reason he needed to find new places. He needed to live his other journey in life. It worked so well. I will always remember him and wish him the best. I am certain he will achieve the best for himself."

"Where is he going?" prompted Katheryn.

"Somewhere around Houston. His girlfriend is returning home. Let me think -- not really, but close to where her parents live. Her brother had insisted in telling her that her parents forgave her and were willing to take her back. She'll go back but not to live with them."

"Long story. And Randolph is in the loop!" ventured Karen.

"Good read. You are smart. Being a writer, you can decipher the game."

Karen smiled, nodded a "thank you" and hoped Sam would continue. He did: "Randolph was like a son to me. He got himself out of drugs and together we did get as many people as we could free of the drug evil. Sally, his girlfriend, was one of them who got out of drugs. Then, she became like him -- two peas in a pod. They would listen to the homeless stories -- I mean young homeless in drugs -- play the game with them and then apply the realities of life." Sam was interrupted by Karen with a question ... as what life. Sam replied ... "realities of life means that is the way it should happen -- live a decent life. People need help, need to see the light. And, they also believe people can turn their lives around."

"So, you and Randolph, and ... Sally were the light," added Katheryn.

"Many of us are that light."

"Then, Randolph and Sally worked in pairs, right?" Karen continued as if ready to collect information for her essay or book. Instead, she braved a question that had lingered in her mind. "Pardon me, Sam. You speak so well, as if you had a good education."

Sam blushed and thanked Karen. "Not much more than high school." He paused and found his better answer. "You see, when I got clean and changed my ways, I started reading the papers daily, you see, discarded papers. Then I came to spend some time in the library. It helped. Father Mancini noticed some changes in my conversation and encouraged me to stay informed and to read when I could." He paused while Karen processed the explanation -- in awe. Sam continued: "It is not a big deal."

"Sorry, Sam, it is a big deal. To me it is. Do you have a cell phone?"

"I do. Under Obama's rules we got cell phones for free. You know, discarded phones. And, we could get service almost for free through the libraries. However, I do not make that much use of it. It could become a vice."

"Thanks, Sam, and sorry for interrupting your story. Go on, if you remember," finished Karen.

Sam smiled and relieved of more questions; actually, he was anxious to finish his stories. "I know you are a writer and that is fine. Let me tell you a couple more stories. When I came to know Sally, Randolph was experienced with girls. He was always with girls or girls would tag along with him. That made me think he was directing them to night clubs, not as a pimp; I swear. It is that he has some charm -- homeless charm, if you understand what I mean. All for the good,

because he would bring them where I was and then we would work on their weaknesses. Most of it was about family, family problems, generation problems and conflicts. Then, we would give them a choice -- live like us, without responsibilities of paying rent, bills, job obligations and sleeping under the stars, in the rain. Drugs lead to trouble, and they knew the repercussions. Once they listened to us and we suggested changes, they started finding good alternatives. When we thought they were ready, we shipped them back to where they had come from. Many times, Randolph and I got them cleaned up, dressed them with good used clothes and gave them some money for a three-day bus trip. Father Mancini helped us with clothes and whatever."

Sam stopped as the three ladies just listened with keen attention. "I am happy for Sally and Randolph. Her brother says she has a job waiting for her. Sally has pop – she can wait on tables, do bartender work, or anything. She needs a break and motivation, a purpose." The ladies were still in listening mode; Sam thought of finishing the narrative. "Randolph will be working on a small farm and having the use of a modest house for free. Randolph and Sally can make it; they will make it."

"How about you?" Braved Elvera, finally.

"I will make it, too. I am here. I understand now that you are my friends, and also feel destined to do what I am doing in a smarter way. I am happy. I will find other Randolphs and Sallys."

Tears were slowly dropping on their cheeks. Sam said he was going to the bathroom.

About the Author



John Carlos de Melo was born in São Miguel, Azores, Portugal in 1941. At age twenty-five, after marrying his high-school sweetheart, he came to America and settled in the San Francisco Bay Area, where he has lived since September, 1966.

After a thirty-four year banking career and then twelve years as a management consultant of small business enterprises, John found joy in writing projects.

Among few short and long articles in two mixed language (Portuguese and English) publications in California and Newark, NJ, he published two books and collaborated on another.

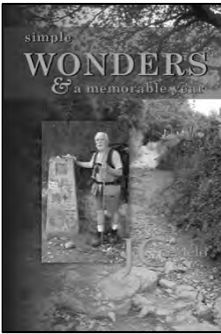
The first – *Simple Wonders* -- a book of memoirs and a narrative of John's year of 2011, became his first test. Satisfied with the result, he veered to fiction where he found his element in *Chasing the Dream*. Indeed, this work is more than an intriguing fictional novel for it embodies the dreams, the drama, the trials and triumphs of human beings searching for a better place for them and for those they came to love.

Married for over fifty-four years, father of three sons and grandfather of seven grandchildren, John values more than ever the importance

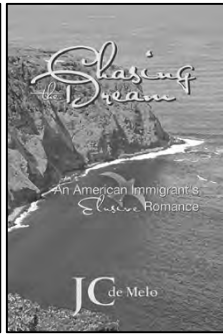
of faith, family and human relationships. Totally integrated in America from the moment he arrived, he still maintains ties with friends he left in his birthplace.



The Author's Works:



***Simple Wonders
and
a Wonderful Year*** –
published 2012



Chasing the Dream
(An American
Emigrant's Elusive
Romance) –
published 2014



Untamed Dreams
(A collaborative
work) – published
2016



***À Procura da
Diáspora*** (In
Portuguese. A replica
of Chasing the Dream)
– published 2019

I've Got
TICKETS
to
Heaven



Just need to call for a limousine

JC de Melo

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Disclaimer

This novel, like any other story, is a product of pure fiction. It has come to exist only to satisfy my desire to add value to the conversation of religion or non-religion, of heaven or of no existence of such place; and above all, of God's presence in our lives. Or any other type of divine creation that has been debated for centuries by all theological and philosophical minds. Well, ask Einstein.

Possessing no degrees or background in any of the essential credentials, my coming to the conversation is then for pure pedestrian or street conversation. Yes, we all talk about issues that, in spite of being under the domain of doctors of some kind, are fundamental to our existence and the right to believe. We are, after all, some sort of experts in one matter or another. Just being alive, observing well, does grant us the right to add to the argument.

There are many aspects, details of the stories and dialogues that may give the appearance of veracity or real-live experiences. They are not. With rare exceptions and in part with the exception of the Author's notes, they do not reflect real experiences of any kind. My imagination then was and is now at work.

Enjoy the ride!

JC de Melo

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Elvera

A conversation with God --- sequel

*"Heaven is filled with converted sinners of all kinds,
and there is room for more."
----- St. Joseph Cafasso*

Afterall we did not talk about the dream on Friday. Although we left Castro Valley early, early enough to be in our summer home before five, the traffic was horrible. We had only time to drop our stuff in the house and then find a place to eat. There was also no need to search for anything fancy. The usual hole-in-the-wall restaurant always served us well; the owners knew us and we were always satisfied eating there.

That said, we postponed the sharing and eventual deep discussion of the dream for Saturday. Or so we thought. It did not happen either for Walter had a list of small projects in our home in Monterey. It is just a sixteen hundred square foot home requiring less than five minutes of walking to reach the ocean. It has one large master bedroom, two small bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a

detached car garage. Although we could afford to make large and convenient improvements, like adding more space and modern stuff, we opted to stay put. Even now, because we never thought of having homes to look like museums and/or have state-of-the-art conveniences. The big cottage was good enough for us and for our three children and their brood whenever time permitted them to visit it. Kids, in many sports activities with games and tournaments on weekends, denied them the pleasures of the ocean and beach environments. For that reason and others, we never had there, the whole family together. Besides, we love our Bay Area, particularly on the East side with easy access to three major highways. We thought we were blessed with unique and old fashion neighborhoods, and were close to the best of the Bay. Indeed, we would brag to friends from other places that the Bay Area, with its diversity, was as unique as one group of seven million people could be. An expensive living for some, but a reliable area where reliability was entrusted to decent civic leaders.

Therefore, we let the Saturday be a Saturday -- relaxation without exploring some new cooking adventures. These types of cooking relaxation and joys were then relegated to more revolutionary ways of physical, mental and spiritual expeditions; such as walking on the beach and using the iconic trails. Walter was not an avid walker. He preferred long but leisure walking where he and I would feel free to air out all of our many thoughts and sometimes intimate emotions. Not guarded and polished, but just free riding exchanges. The past was not that much revisited. It was like the immediate past that included our recent decisions to modify our impact on careers, and the challenges that our children and now growing grandchildren were facing in their lives. These mattered. The status of the world where more bad news obliterated the news that

could earn the coveted prize that the *glass was half full* also mattered. Many times, we laughed that some of the bad news derived from decisions that we had not approved. The variables were so many that juxta-positioning them would cause civil wars.

On the cooking side, for certain, I was never known for being a gourmet chef or a pioneer in the nouveau culinary expeditions. Yet, my cooking never embarrassed me. I held my ground on typical family food on weekdays and expanded to weekend creative meals. Watching and learning from my mother-in-law, I could replicate her skill and cook great Basque food or food borrowed from the other regions -- like Paella from Galicia. And that was exactly what I cooked for the Saturday -- Paella Louisiana style. Walter even used to say in my early years watching and taking notes from my mother-in-law's old fashion and flavorful cooking that: *you honor my mother with your "from the old country's cuisine."* Indeed, I learned from her how to cook Paella, Octopus salad, or served whole with the body and the tentacles spread on a wood serving board. But, above all, I learned to choose and bake good lamb chops.



"Are you ready? Really?"

"Darn! After too many false starts, I have to be ready. I am actually better prepared to start the recollection. I improved my notes to confirm the details are secure, real and reflect our values."

I was ready and Walt was serious; for, like me, wanting to share, he wanted to listen. It involved matters dear to both of us. Walt rarely read the Bible on purpose; it was not his thing. He read articles, short dissertations on matters of the Gospels, the church's bulletin and

other material I suggested he read. I actually felt comfortable with the way he managed his spirituality -- practical and to himself. It was far better than mine. While he took our faith as it was without any special emotional stress, I had to dig for more proof of anything; I had to invest some inner acceptance of the occult. There was some innocence in Walt's practical ways, but he had an unequivocal approach to matters dear to his heart. Walt always extended a hand to anyone who genuinely asked for help. His employees were the first to get the feel and smell of all he was about. But if you crossed him, he would let you know that the one who lost was the one who received. He used to say: "I never regret what I do for others; I feel sorry for those who betray the good hand when extended -- the gesture of the Good Samaritan."

After Sunday Mass, when in Monterey, we went for our typical brunch, and then back to our living room for some TV viewing and reading. Our living room, more like a family room (one we did not have), was a favorite place to spend a placid Sunday afternoon. With no obligations of any kind, Walter had decided we would return to Castro Valley on Monday. No TV viewing -- our Raiders were not playing in this time slot. With no reading, we were ready!

"Okay, we are ready. But let's have a brief discussion on dreams. Let's talk about what we remember and what we have learned." As usual, me, the college graduate girl initiated the drill. "Do you know how long they last, what matters or events they deal with, or where they happen?"

"I never read anything about dreams or how they happen or their length. We talk, forget, and move on."

"Good point" I said. "And I bet yours would be different from mine. You may take your responsibilities with a high degree of seriousness, but never fanatically or pushing yourself to the limits."

You know me -- I am different. So, my dreams reflect my busy mind."

As usual, Elvera was pontificating like an expert on dreams.

"Okay, nice. How long do they last?" demanded Walter.

"They can last a few seconds, on an average, or as long as thirty minutes."

"That long?"

"Like I said -- yours, by your very personality and temperament, should not last long. That is the way you are -- simple, effective and uncomplicated. They should not last long."

"You are being nice to me. Any plans for the rest of the day? Shall we rent a room?"

"See, you are funny. I am also funny but you are seriously and intelligently funny. Thanks. As for renting a room, we shall see."

Elvera extended her hand to Walter. He kissed her instead.

"Okay, professor -- start the story."



"I entered a place that, to me, did not look like heaven. I went through a glass door, or so it seemed, and encountered nothing but people being escorted towards a reception area. I followed the crowd and came to this enormous half-moon reception area. There, receptionists working on computers, either interrogated people or dispatched them to ushers who escorted them to designated areas. Everything was displayed on the big screens that covered the wall -- whatever looked like walls. There were no names, background, hobbies, deeds, misdeeds, no ages, no places of origin, gender distinctions and other personal attributes. No pictures, nothing."

In this big hall, there were six gates, the size of rolling door gates in large warehouses, just like the one on your shop. Two gates on each side -- in front of us, two to the right side and two to the left." Elvera paused for a moment, seeing no signs of Walter holding back but giggling; nevertheless, she felt comfortable in proceeding. "I am glad you're not laughing." Walter waved her to continue. "Each gate had a color that kind of matched the colors of the incoming traffic and which glowed on their wrists. Mine was yellow. I looked at my wrists and they glowed yellow, in a bracelet type glow. The other colors, as I noticed later on, were, let me see, green, black, blue and grey. I am missing one color. I remember ... that's it ... orange. Orange! Certainly, this color was next to my gate."

"No white door gates?"

"Nope. The only white I saw was the white of the ushers, like angel white. No wings. But they, hundreds I presume, moved so effortlessly, like skating without skates. Everything on their part floated."

"So, the color on your wrists matched the color of your gate. Meaning you belonged to the yellow section. Could you tell the number of people in each section? Did some or other wrists display more colors than other gates?"

"Can't remember. I did not take notes of that. Unless, let me think ... yes, 'green; had less people. And that was when I signaled for one usher to explain the significance of colors."

"And..."

"I became disappointed. Yellow, meant I had to wait long for a meeting with the Lord or assistants."

"Or Saint Peter," Walter retorted while cracking up with laughter.

“What’s so funny? Of course, I was disappointed in waiting too long.”

“That was a dream. Why getting so sad?”

Elvera, now comforted with Walter’s mild and ironic interjection, proceeded in building her narrative before she met with God. She recounted with vivid pleasure, entrants immediately marked with white, being escorted behind the reception area and never seen again. These were young people, dressed normally, humbly and others in rags, with scars from wounds inflicted perhaps in slums anywhere in the world, with t-shirts framed with pictures and descriptions in different languages. A few older people also possessed white bracelets. She guessed these people were going directly to heaven.

Then she directed her narrative to those supposedly marked red. These, coming on a rolling carpet, bypassed everything. No descriptions of names, name to fame misdeeds or crimes were seen. They all came in attire as perhaps as they had died -- three-piece suits, cocktail gowns, bikinis, swim shorts, deck shoes and nightgowns. Their faces showed disgusting or horrific glares. During the long wait, Elvera could surmise that as they arrived through the revolving door, and once they had glanced down to their right, they must have felt terrorized. Others just laughed and gazed hysterically as if going to a resort or a very warm place.

“Wow. I bet they were being escorted to hell, without a chance for an interview or parole. Straight down. Or, happy with their fate.”

“I guess so. Good analogy, but funny, Walt.”

“You also cited the colors black and orange. And the color blue as practically going straight to heaven.”

“I did. Orange was almost like yellow. Migrating to green would take longer than yellow. Black is a different story and I could not

grasp fully their predicament or their final destination. It encompassed people who were religious leaders of every kind, professors in religion, philosophy, theology, atheism -- you name it. I assumed it would be any professional with influence on behavior."

"Wow! That could include anybody, including priests. Unless they repented."

"I have no idea. A few of them could have belonged to any color -- including red."

"How long did you have to fulfill your job before going to the better place?"

"Looked long. But, as I was told during my interview with God, the word or meaning of time does not exist there. Nothing is measured as it is in our planet. We just feel something and then (later) try to decipher what it meant. It is just different, unexplainable. God always smiled at my questions about earthlings' habits."

Elvera resumed her story on how she meets God. Surprised in not seeing St. Peter, God tells her that the Rock is equally interviewing entrants from the colors black, grey and orange. God reserves yellow and green for Himself. She also describes the dialogues depicting her initial sadness and then the comfort in knowing that God has a role for her or all those wearing yellow. She was told that she would graduate to green in time.

"So, you talked, he interviewed you, you felt bad, then you lightened up once a role was given to you. Were you happy?"

"Of course, I was. I knew heaven would be within my reach; because God said so. It would not be a direct line, for I had more work to do. Actually, let me think how I felt. Although pride was no longer important to me, I almost felt lucky that God had a role for me -- like I was important, and had interpersonal skills." She paused,

reconfigured her recollections and then said. "Walt, it is hard to describe."

"Tell it in any way you think. I am enjoying this trip of yours -- to heaven."

"How are you doing Vera? Good to see you. You've done nice work. Some more is required of you. Please, smile, for it will not last long, it will be just a little harsh at first. Smile! When you love me and your neighbor nothing is harsh! I just used the word for you to get the gist."

"Gist, like harsh -- earth's words? That is cool, God."

"Exactly. Our vocabulary is all logical and lovely. Thus, you'll be happy being useful to other candidates to heaven. It will be like pain and joy; more pain and joy and then relief that the place I prepared for you and my children will be yours forever."

"Nice to know that. Some suffering and then exhilaration. Suffering no more after my penance! Right?"

"Look at me Vera, it is like paying forward. You have done great things on earth, helped so many, you've created opportunities for my Holy Spirit to grant graces. I know, I know. You on earth think that you convert my stubborn and fallen away children. That is okay to think that way or until vanity possesses you all. I understand. I do. However, you no longer act with undue pride. You are fine. This temporary stage is ... call it what you want ... just a short stay before paradise. Unless many deny me, reject me, even until the last second."

"Oh, you mentioned seconds. I thought having no watches, no measuring sticks, You would not cite seconds."

"Elvera..." Elvera blinked her eyes and pursed her lips for God had addressed her earlier as Vera, an intimate approach. God resumed... "I know your mother called you Elvera when she was mad

at you. Even your husband jokes with you once in a while." Elvera broadened her smile. "I mentioned seconds, like in time, only to make you feel at home. I want you to feel this way -- relaxed and ready to roll up your sleeves and take on some important duties." Elvera was enjoying God's way of talking, his way of creating a positive environment. She also accepted God's 'Elvera' thing just as she came to accept her mother's motherly reprimand.

"Thank you, Lord. Talking to you like this is so comfortable. Am I going to see your son? Jesus? He was my idol, my rock, my bridge to everything good."

"Not this time. He is on earth still working diligently gathering lost sheep. He, and Mother Mary are always happily rescuing lost souls or inspiring them to make amends. Always!"

"I guess everyone has a role. It is not just relaxing at the beach, or playing bridge, or playing golf with Walt. Duties!"

"Of course, there is life up here. Just immensely different from life on earth. I designed it to be like here -- a sample of paradise. But I had competition. You know that. And I had to remake the mold. Remember that in my love letter to my people?"

"You mean the Book; the Bible?"

"Good call. Good knowledge."

"You're right, God. But it was so tough to keep your commandments. We are always agitated and sometimes horrified. I am anxious coming up here, even if I am in a transition mode -- in the pipeline to heaven."

"C'mon Vera. Give me a break. I am always helping you and everyone else. The only thing you have to do is trust, trust me. Tell me the truth: when you are in touch with me, concentrating and asking for help, did I betray you? Did I leave you drifting, or did I cause you to instantly find your way to the solution for your needs?"

"No, God, never did you leave me alone when I asked for help in a sincere manner. When I was sincere in my gut, you know what I mean, I got instant help. And it feels good. You remember that; don't you? I always pleaded my pardon for not trusting you. But then when I really did, you fixed the problem, or let me fix it. And I apologized to you on my knees. Didn't I?"

"Yes, you did. Sincerity unlike repetitive prayers, not from the heart, or as you said eloquently from the gut, always got my attention. You rang the bell and I delivered."

"Lord, this is so good. Talking with you as if we were brother and sister. So cool!"

"I am glad you like it. This is the way I created you and Walter in my image. In time you will be in my place -- the place I created for you and all mankind. After all it took a great deal of thinking in creating the world with all its moving parts, and reciprocal properties, all with a variety of functions where everyone was dependent on each other. Creating you and Walter took a lot more thinking. And then my plan almost got hijacked by my right-hand angel. Jealousy, absolute jealousy. And I had to re-invent myself -- time after time. I will win until the end of time, when I will re-invent myself differently."

"Wow! Great talk. I wish I were down on earth so I could tell what I learned here. Then, with all this talk it means I am in; I am here to stay. Can I take this to the bank?"

"Funny talk, still using earth's vocabulary?"

"Well, you also used earth's lingo. So, being in, where do I go now?"

"Not too fast; let's talk about the task I have for you before you come in for good -- the eternity. The task will help me and you at the same time... C'mon ... don't make that face! Just as on earth, when faith and deeds matter, you will help me by reassuring that my

children don't stray too far from my reign. Are you ready for the task?"

"But if I fail, will I still have a chance to come and stay with You? Will this take too long?"

"In earthly time it may take long. Let me tell you the details."

God explained to Elvera that her task, before coming to paradise forever, would entail following humans on earth. Staying connected through the spirit; yet, with no contacts or physical influence on the assigned human.

"Therefore, I will follow this person wherever he or she goes, have no way to make corrections on behavior, bad decisions, etc...." ... "what's there to gain, to help? Just watching bad outcomes is like torture; like purgatory!" ... "You are laughing! But I am serious! This hurts!"

"Relax Vera. The fact that there is no contact does not imply you'll have no impact. Haven't you heard of guardian angels? Haven't you heard people saying 'I was saved by a guardian angel?'"

"I guess You are right; like always. Thank you, Lord. Right now, I do not have to say 'I hope so.' Because I know so."

God smiled broadly.



"Just like that! Never showing fear in talking to God. Or as if you were brothers or teammates!"

"Yes, no fear, no anguish, no second guessing, no nothing! Remember, for the last few years my approach to God and his designs has changed measurably. Sometimes I feel I am locked in with things of God. Other times, I am confused or feel lost; like God deserted me.

Or that he left me fend for myself. However, in between, I'm staying patient, accepting my sadness and my emptiness and confusion; but never wavering because I sense it is just a matter of time when I find my footing and the bridge to God. Call it the Holy Spirit, or..."

"Your ticket to heaven!" prompted Walter.

Elvera offered no rebuttal and Walter completed his thought. "Come here my love." Elvera dragged her body towards Walter and rested her head on his chest. Walter wrapped his hand around her head, her shoulders, her neck and kissed her warmly. "I would be scared of having such a dream; even if it were as sweet as what you narrated. I do not live agitated or pessimistic or concerned. We have a good life; we have a good family. Yet, once in a while I have doubts, fears or just that I am lost and far from being ready. I can't fathom life after we finish our journey. Or like you." Walter paused, thought again what to say or to direct the conversation to other matters. Then he concluded. "I have had in the past, distant past, horrible dreams, cringing dreams. Lately they are calm, almost serene. I don't know why!"

"You must have made peace with you, with your **you**. Not that you were wild or lost. I mean you got your priorities in order and created more time for serene and revealing introspection."

"We need to rent a room. Always protecting me." Elvera threw him a flirtatious smile.

Walter liked the smile but, at the moment, preferred to add one or two more questions about the dream. "What do you plan to do now with your dream? You said earlier, before choosing me for confessor, you would talk with Father Lukas. Are you going to do that?"

"I don't think so. As a parish priest, he is always busy. You know that."

"Yes, I know. Yet, he has a lot of respect for you."

"That is good. I may use other options. Still, let's be fair here. You helped me getting it out. That is more than good enough. Unless, the other members of our group find the components of the dream interesting. We'll see."

"As far as I have seen, they all admire you. Some may actually find parts of your dream as optimal discussing points. But I am not part of the group. I just join you folks for the leftovers."

"Does that bother you, Walt?"

"None whatsoever. Joining you on drinking gatherings fits me well. For instance, Father Mancini would be good. He has done it all, has been close to it all, close to dirt, to the street and to Sam. Fausto and Sam must have their own warehouse of dreams."

"Yes, Fausto would be the ideal person to share the morsels. He is on the other side of the bay. I am sure he could be conned into joining me and some others on our side; I mean Max, or even Herb. Both like good chats. Indeed, we can use the dream as an excuse to get together. I'll think about it." Elvera paused, thought more and then said: "they'll come for any excuse."

"Max would be good. Being agnostic would make more sense. He may even share his own dreams."

"Max is so authentic. A better human being than many Catholics I know. Being on the fence is not a big deal. At this time, it is more for convenience he stays agnostic. Besides, it is so soon for him to change sides. He is the president on merit and well regarded in his conference. We get along so well, though."

"What conference are you talking about? The what's it called?"

"The Agnostic Society of Northern California!" Walter was still a bit confused and she added: "Is there anyone else?"

"I had never heard of such thing. I thought you meant the one that you and Fausto, and Herb belong!" stated Walter.

"I can see the confusion for I never mentioned Max's club before. You were thinking about 'Be-a-difference-Foundation.' Two different organizations," replied Elvera.

"Then, what do we have here?" asked Walter.

"Well, Max's organization has its own mission; like a church without being a church. What do you know about the Foundation?" Inquired Elvera.

"Not much either. Just that you drag me to a function here and there, I guess and invite me to have a meal with you guys and, by default, I pay the bill," chuckled Walter.

"That is not fair. Only a couple of times and, on both occasions, you were in a Good Samaritan mood. Even my friends felt embarrassed the second time."

"Just kidding. Your friends deserve my only way to say thanks to them. It keeps me happy knowing about the people you are engaged with. I have even learned a lot with your friends. But, now, forget Max's club. How does your foundation operate? Like the Rotary?"

"No, no similarities of any kind; including the organization's structure."

"Okay, tell me more. Such as the clubs you belong, your meetings, etc." concluded Walter.

"First it is not like the Rotary or similar service clubs who have a global structure and aligned regionally, by geographic areas. *Be-a-Difference Rainbow Foundation* is philanthropic, non-sectarian organization -- created by wealthy patrons."

"Good; like "Make a Wish Foundation?" questioned Walter.

"I do not know about it; but my guess it is not like that. Leaving that notion aside, *Be-a-Difference Rainbow Foundation*, like I said, is

made up of wealthy but equally very caring businessmen and businesswomen, entrepreneurs. Not on the same level as Bill Gates, Warren Buffet and the like. Our benefactors are millionaires but below billions. However, they lend their side-line energies, create support through shelters, donate their money and oversee their charity. If one wants to call it a charity, that is. They have eight councils in the Bay Area, who act as advisors on their plans and also engage in other smaller undertakings like the ones in which Fausto, Max and I are involved."

Elvera's explanation was credible; yet too vast in detail and scope. Walter's face conveyed that invitation for Elvera to convert the narrative into small change or put an end to the matter. "I suspect you are confused. It is a simple operation but far different than civic clubs. Besides the foundation moves quite a bit of money. Let me see: (1) The Foundation donates money to all deserving causes and their own cause ... as I mentioned before. They have budgets, plans and receive much info on their own, for they have professional consultants; (2) aside from that, they created councils of very credentialed and good-willed volunteers. It is like me and the others you've come to know. Not only do we collect and share information, but also, on a separate level, we are assigned to evaluate such information. And, in the process, we identify individuals that reflect true and tangible **be-a-difference** human beings. This task, of selecting winners, is done once every six months.

"And that is what you and Herb and Fausto get involved..." said Walter.

"Exactly! For instance, I do belong to the Advisory Board -- that big money part -- and also to one of the eight councils in the Bay Area that identifies with the smaller deeds, identify and reward people who exemplify the best of the best good-doers. You see, two different

objectives. I happen to belong to the big enchilada and the smaller one -- the smaller one that fills my heart. Get it?"

"I get it. On the smaller fish, the non-advisory, to what council do you belong? Herb and Fausto are in the city, and you and Max are here in the East Bay. How's that?" inquired Walter. "Now, this is confusing to me."

"It is and it is not. Again, each of the eight councils are aligned in geographic areas. It is just for logic alignment and not service. Because we do not serve anyone. Max and I belong to Fausto's council for friendship. We get along so well. In fact, we are well regarded in the Bay Area federation of councils. That is all. And each council has cells, ranging from six to eight members. That is why our cell meets everywhere."

"Well explained. Therefore, your organization, the big gun, does a lot of good almost underground, with no fanfare, no publicity. I like it that way. And, it does not involve politics."

"I agree with your thinking. So, where were we? Were we talking about Sam?"

"Yes, you were talking about Max and then you veered to Sam," alerted Walter.

"Thinking of Sam..." Elvera forcing herself to recollect the intended details, just said ..." Oh, Sam is such a good man. What a human being God created."

"Has Sam ever revealed details of his past? I wonder why he chose the streets for his habitat! With too much riding on his reputation, he rejects any kind of overture to main street -- a place with a room and a bed. His buddy, what's his name?"

"You mean Randolph?"

"Yes, I just met him once. But he and Sam look like two peas in the same pod."

Elvera stopped. Walter had no questions to ask. Then, remembering what she intended to say in the first place, said:

"We learned some bits and pieces about his past from Sam. It is a combination of family past, back in Georgia and also a vocation thing -- doing good occupies all his time."

"Are you close enough to him to ask questions about dreams? Are you that close?"

"You mean ask Sam questions about dreams? Never crossed my mind. It would sound weird; I am not close to him as you imply. Actually, only Fausto is close to him. Sam slips through our grasp."

Walter just grinned and waited for more. "Nevertheless, why are we now investing so much talk on dreams? Dreams are like anything else in life. Everyone has them and encounters them. One has to feel comfortable sharing dreams as a way of getting a useful conversation started. Sam would be far-fetching. Not even Fausto, who deals with him almost every day, has a sure bridge to Sam."

"Okay, you have a plan."

Elvera just nodded, then stayed quiet, pensive. She conceded to herself that her dreams were compelling enough to merit a conversation marathon. Still, there was the possibility that they could fade away soon.

"Look, it is almost four o'clock. Do you want to go out for dinner? An early dinner?"

"Nah. I am still full from the brunch. How about going for a matinee to see a good movie on the big screen? And then decide on food. What do you say?"

"Okay! A movie again is not a bad idea."

“Let me google on what’s available.”

“That’s a deal.”

Fausto and Herbert

Adopting Sam

The best way to find yourself

Is to lose yourself in the service of others

----- *Gandhi*

Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile

-----*Einstein*

Elvera called Fausto and listened to the typical recorded greeting stating he was away from his phone and that a message would be desirable. Text messaging would also be okay via his cell phone. Elvera quickly thought up an adequate reply that reflected her astute thinking, or thinking well on the fly: "This is your friend from the East Bay. Yes, with a woman's voice, perhaps the only woman in the East Bay that calls you for confession. Why bother with text messaging when e-mail would do the same? At least I could print your message if you lied to me. Sorry, Fausto, I am in a good mood. I just want to talk to you about a couple of issues. Greetings and peace!"

That was one of her important calls she had in mind right after she arrived from the long weekend away at her Monterey home. The

dream, the enjoyable discussion of her dream with Walter and the need to proceed to other matters, gave her a bundle of energy and some sort of adrenaline towards finding additional answers to her concerns. Walter had cleared the shell covered pick-up truck and placed the coolers and plastic boxes in their right spots. They had to be parked in the right spots, for, after years of accumulating tools, plumbing and air conditioning parts in his garage, he gave them all up. Not really. He summoned two of his employees to clear the garage of unnecessary tools and parts out of there and reroute them to recycling places or transfer them to his business warehouse. He had succeeded in keeping it masterfully cleaned and organized to the point that sometimes friends, on short visits, would claim they would live in the garage year-round, or even have an occasional drinking party.

Arriving at two o'clock in the afternoon allowed Walter no time to either go to the shop or find a buddy for a nine-hole round of golf. He had not played golf at all for almost two weeks. The weather had been so-so and Elvera was on one of her spiritual journeys that now included a dream. He had hoped the conversation on the weekend would be the last chapter on his assignment as confidant and dream interpreter. Knowing Elvera's nature, he doubted that the end would be near. Actually, she had already begged him to recall some of his own dreams. *No way -- they are not pretty or perhaps they are scary.*

Elvera, while taking care of food for dinner, had called Father Fausto Mancini and then planned to call Pastor Herbert Hawkins. A certain plan was forming in her mind. Some upcoming assignments were on the calendar: a charity talk for a group of elderly women, and a presentation at a Catholic High School. The first would bring some dough for a Catholic Charity Foundation, and the latter would excite late teenagers -- high school seniors -- to give their all to worthy causes. Her mantra with these young people was that they should shy away from the usual clichés of *you are the future of society*, and,

instead, render inspiration towards becoming *the now movers and shakers of the world*. She was adamant that they not only live their age but also be relevant: *look at me, I am almost on social security, taking more pills than milk, and losing my hearing. You are credible. Then, be relevant right now. Waiting for my age will not make the cut, for wisdom does not solve all the problems. Engagement and purpose will make a difference.*

She would continue and master her delivery with *Yeah, yeah, I am wiser now and can still do things others have not done yet. But you live in the now, not on older people's schedule. I also like to play bridge*. She would vary her speeches and interchanges and provide fresh ideas always. Nevertheless, she mostly defied and challenged the young folks to start acting and making a difference in the moment. *How long do you know you will live? Long! I hope. But no one knows*. The students always applauded her mini-speeches and challenged her to visit again with fresh ideas.

For Elvera, Fausto was the ideal parish priest without spending too much time in the building. He had a competent deacon who had retired from the banking industry, a parish secretary and a few volunteers that handled all the books and other needs. He also had a parish council that managed the simple church business; like a business. They possessed one uncanny attribute -- an ability to attract generous donors that would serve well two other parishes in Latin countries and in Africa. Father Fausto Mancini's was a small parish in the business district, with a typically lower number of parishioners. However, he had a generous number of visitors and Mass attendees during day-time. Besides visits to two hospitals, a funeral service every now and then, one assisted living and retirement center, member of a couple of semi-civic groups, Fausto's remaining time was around homeless environments. He always found time for the downtrodden or soup kitchen events. Elvera would label him a

“missionary on wheels.” He moved quickly from one environment to another almost effortlessly. She even remembered that one day a few months ago, she had partnered with Fausto, both dressed in clumsy clothing, in order to pay visits to their clients in the streets, like brother and sister or as a middle-aged husband and wife team. That was the one and only time she had come home totally vindicated. “This is living,” she remembered saying it to Walter.

“Cheers, Vera. Relax. It was just a missed telephone call. You must have forgotten I have a cell phone; a good one and my only extravagance. You dialed the church’s number instead. I suspect it is dinner time. You can call me after your dinner -- until midnight.”

“Thanks Fausto. Walt had gone to the store and I was in the bathroom. Missed your call by a few seconds.”

“Just like that. No secrets at all.”

“What’s there to hide?” He laughed, she did, too.

“How was the weekend in Monterey? Was the weather good? Did you play golf at Pebble Beach?”

“Pebble Beach? Me, on a retiree’s budget?” Fausto laughed and she continued. “No. In my case, you know the best golf I play is being a good caddy. After eight misses I would pull the ball up and keep it in my pocket. You know, I avoid annoying Walt and his buddies because I take too many swings.” Fausto understood and applauded her strategy. “Anyway, no time for golf; besides, some of Walt’s buddies were away. But we had a good time, worthy of the area. We also took short and long walks, enjoyed the ocean breeze, a good movie and lots of chat with Walt.” Elvera hesitated hitting Fausto with details about her dream. The importance of the dream could not be mixed with casual talk.

“I admire the way you and Walt are handling more free time together. Most people I come to know get very nervous and uncomfortable in having much time together, kind of invading each

other's territory. It is a logical phenomenon -- invading space and time."

"You are correct. I know some couples that cannot take it without a fuss, or even some friction." Fausto sensed that Elvera had another justification for their getting along well. Indeed! "Remember that Walt finds time to visit the shop a few hours a day or when it pleases him. Golf and baseball games occupy his time as well. So, we naturally give some space to each other. And I am busy; and will always stay busy and involved. The rest of the time, which is plenty more, we spend discovering each other's secrets. We do have and cherish our independence as much as our togetherness."

"That is true. Lucky you and lucky everyone who benefits from your kindness and Walt's wits. Anyway, what's on the table?"

"We need to have a simple preparation for our potential meeting with professor Eichelberger. I am not saying all of us in the group, but at least you, Herb, and I need to meet for some preliminary conversation."

"Okay, I agree. And what do you have in mind? My schedule for this week is light and typical. In the next two weeks things get tight."

To Elvera, Fausto's light schedule meant there were no funerals to service, no meetings with Catholic Charities, or Sam was not in trouble. "Well, tomorrow I have an afternoon meeting in church and a speaking engagement at a Catholic High School on Friday. Wednesday and Thursday look good for me. I just need to call Herb. Unless..."

"... Unless I do it."

"Of course, you talk regularly. Being adversaries makes no difference to you."

Fausto just smiled; Elvera also could tell as he said: "Hold your accusation. Herb has his ideas and beliefs. Yet, we both deliver the goods and God so far has not told us to handle spiritual needs differently. I know you are joking." Elvera just sent a few sighs on her

side of the line. "I take it you want us on your side of the Bay. That means we'll take BART and you pick us up at the Broadway station, just as we did a month ago."

"Right on. Thursday could be ideal; 11:30 in the morning I will pick up you gentlemen there." Silence followed until Elvera found courage to add the clincher, and no clincher. "Listen I will pay for lunch. Walt got a bonus from the company. The kids were very generous. Herb has money but your pockets are as clean as Sam's pockets."

"That's a deal. And taking alms comes with the territory. Herb rarely takes a pass either. I will call you if Herb cannot make Thursday. Okay?"

"Okay. See you Thursday."



"You guys look spiffy, casual but modern. Did you board the same train?"

"No, but we talked over the phone. We were about eight minutes apart. I waited at the station," Herbert replied.

"So, you like my attire, matching Herb's. Fortunately, he carries no tie."

"Normally you do not tell jokes. It is my territory. Yet, I like a man (every now and then) who adds a tie to his repertoire of clothing. Now, you, Fausto are a surprise to me. The rags sporting 49ers ads needed to go. You don't look homeless, but fit for intellectual arguments." Both Herbert and Fausto could tell they were targeted for smart talk from and with Elvera.

"Shall we go back to the city, Herb? I sense we cannot match or are not ready for Vera's wit. She must have a plan. And we have had

no advance notice. Talking about Eichelberger could have been accomplished by e-mail, anyway. Don't you agree, Herb?" Herbert just nodded and said:

"I do not talk your language. But enough of this BS. Where are we going? Fausto tells me Walt hit the jackpot. You are paying. Is that it?"

"No secrets, Fausto. Yes, I will be glad to splurge with you, eclectic folks. Let's walk to my car parked outside. I was lucky to have found a space on the street. And then let's drive to Emeryville. There is a good place to eat and talk; noisy but ideal for our chat."

"Eclectic?! Hanh! That's what we are now, brother Herbert -- eclectic." Herbert chuckled, Elvera offered a modest smile, but said in defense of the use of her adjective:

"Yes, you are. Both of you are. One is a Roman Catholic priest and the other a Lutheran minister. Both of you espouse different philosophies but are currently ecumenical partners, post Vatican II adherents."

"Ecumenical! Post Vatican II! Way past reformation. It took that long -- over four hundred years," noted Herbert.

"Let's go Vera, before you drown in your own adjectives. I can take a good (free) lunch," concluded Fausto.



"Good place. Never been here. I did come before, a mile further, to Berkeley. The restaurant was famous for good Italian cuisine and sea food. I guess it is now closed or disappeared. Let me see... Spengers!" said Herbert.

"Never been in either," Fausto said.

"Fisherman's wharf was getting too expensive and too crowded," continued Herbert.

"I loved Spenger's sourdough bread. I would go there just for their bread and butter. One flaw, though: unless you enjoyed a good time at the bar, the wait at times was prohibitive. That is why these other two restaurants came to be; I guess. It is my take. Still, in typical honesty, I never had trouble finding a table. Walt knew at least two waiters that responded nicely to Walt's tips. I remember one saying -- 'your table is reserved, Mr. Betancourt. Follow me.' All the time. That is what I call 'who knows who.'"

They ordered the food. Fausto ordered a Ruben Sandwich with salad on the side and Herbert ordered a crab sandwich with French fries. Still undecided, Elvera ordered calamari steak with their delicious mashed potatoes and glazed string beans. All opted for chardonnay. Red wine, at lunch, would cause drowsiness. They wanted to talk about the meeting. Elvera did not care less for the professor's project; her dream was an exclusive matter camouflaged in project preparation.

"Cheers! To our friendship and now to Walt as well."

"Thanks, Vera. This is one of a few times I do not profess vows of poverty," said Fausto.

"In my case I am just honoring Jesus' miracle -- the changing of water into wine," confirmed Herbert. "And by the way, Fausto, did Jesus transform water into red wine or make the water taste like wine? Like this one, though white. Really good."

"You stumped me with such a question. I have no idea. In my seminary years, reading the Bible and learning more about the history of the times, I have no recollection about grape and wine choices. Yet, that area in the Mediterranean is not a haven for white wines. Anyway, we are not here to discuss viniculture."

"Your conversation or the subjects for conversation are always reasons for me to be excited about talking with you. You play your

thoughts well and place bridges to heaven with such subtlety." She paused then added: "I was hungry."

Herbert also hinted he was enjoying his crab sandwich and then said: "I do not mind talking about professor Eichelberger's project. It has meaning. And by including us in the mix, it could improve the students' thesis in philosophy. Two religious professionals, one credible Catholic layperson and one capable Agnostic, must make a difference on their research. However, we need two more players to make up the number he suggested. Six students and six interviewees. Right?"

"Right," confirmed Elvera. "Max in, makes four and, two more outside the religious main stream, should provide a good balance." Elvera paused, thought further and added a provable clincher. "The professor had his thoughts on Sam. Having him as kind of a Mother Teresa without habits and religious connections, would guarantee great outcomes."

Fausto added: "Yes, it would be a home run. But he'll never show his face on matters like this one. No way! We need to find the missing pieces elsewhere. Sorry, Mr. Professor. A homeless person in the research would hit the papers like fireworks."

"Okay, I know Sam but not nearly as well as you two know him. He is kind of a hero to me -- that is all I know." She paused; Fausto and Herbert thought she had more on Sam. Instead she said: "I have an answer that can fill the voids."

"Go ahead; we trust you," said Herbert.

"It is almost a long shot, but it is worth a try. Walt could fit the mold of an unattached spiritual person, for he is a man with no religious attachments. He goes to Mass with me on Sundays and on special occasions. He has no religious trappings, can handle a conversation involving beliefs, etc. but, he is not like me. And, certainly like you. He will fit because, in spite of his superficial involvement in matters such as the ones we deal regularly, he

respects his culture of the old country and sponsors anything that elevates the soul -- human beings. In other words, his Christian traditions are ingrained in him; his achievements have been balanced with pride and modesty. Which means he can deliver common sense."

She paused as the two waited for their moment. "He has just a high school education and a few courses at a junior college. Nonetheless, he reads his stuff. I like what he reads. And he, initially pushing my idea away, will cave in. I know that."

"Did you finish? You can go on; but I am sold on the idea. Relevancy wins me all the time. Bring him in."

"Thanks Herb. I suspect you will agree, Fausto."

"Of course, I do. He is recruited. We still need one more."

"I will fix it, too. We need another woman. There'll be female students in the game. Perhaps a ratio of forty-sixty percent. Do you think so?"

"Nowadays, yes. You Catholics still remain stuck on no-women priests. However, women are equally engaged on philosophy." Fausto dismissed Herbert's bait.



They were savoring the last pieces of their food. Elvera had a thought about two not yet fully identified players in the group of six. She opened the talk:

"I am still thinking about the players. We are in as well as Max. The other two depend on my convincing them to also join. My friend would fit quite well and Walt could enlist and provoke some laughs -- Archie Bunker style. Can you add anything to this; in case I do not succeed?"

"I should not worry about this thing. The professor will be happy with us four. I guess Fausto will not worry about it, either. Right?" retorted Herbert.

Father Mancini's silence was indicative of, so far, Elvera could deliver the correct players to add relevancy to the professor's project. Elvera added: "This is it, then."

"Really? How can you be so sure that Fausto has said his peace? Besides our thought in including Sam?"

Elvera replied: "His silence tells me he defers his choices to us. He's a busy man and I suspect he could find someone that would adequately fit in with us. He would name Sam if it fit the bill. Isn't that it, Herb?" Fausto Mancini was still enjoying what was left of his sandwich, while exchanging smiles with Herbert and Elvera.

"Okay Herb. It sounds like you know him quite well, too; you know his environment and secrets. However, you two have been friends for some time, I guess. I have known you folks for just two years. Did you know each other before you knew me?"

Mancini said: "You are talking about him, not Sam?!" Elvera nodded yes. "Herb, up close ... not more than two years. Maybe three. I had seen him in our organization for some years; but never close. Remember BaDR (Be a Difference Rainbow) is not small. We cover the whole Bay Area."

"I know. How did this happen that you became like twins?" asked Elvera.

"Tell her, Herb." Herbert agreed.

"Strange ways, or God's ways. It was through my brother-in-law, a Chicago resident. It will take long to at least do it justice. It involves Sam, too."

"I have time and this sounds like a rich find. How about you, Fausto?" said Elvera.

“Go ahead Herb. Start the story. My phone has not rung yet; no messages. Like Elvera suggested, we can get coffee. Vera pays the bill and we move to the bar.”

Elvera for sure was experiencing excitement beyond her expectations. After all, these missionaries of the street were also funny.



Edmund Conrad walked side by side with what he thought was a homeless person. His clothes were shabby, not smelly, dirty or even tattered. He had met him with another homeless person -- perhaps buddies -- on the street. Both were not sitting as most homeless did -- their backs against the wall, slumped on their knees, eyes semi-closed, holding a wrinkled brown paper bag housing a bottle of Bronco wine. Their eyes were semi-open as they extended their hands for small change or begging for food. Food or money for food was the customary cover for something else. Maybe if they changed the routine -- like a new marketing idea -- they would have more success. It would be worth a try. But his, now walking together companion, had to be homeless. After all, he was in San Francisco, close to downtown or thereabouts, in one of those many streets crossing Mission and/or Market streets. As beautiful and quaint San Francisco was, homelessness was an additional fixture -- many times an overblown fixture. He knew that because his brother-in-law had indicated in so many words what San Francisco had accomplished in combating the ever-growing population of homeless folks.

He still did not know why he spontaneously followed this homeless person; he did not know his name and or felt motivated to ask or entertain introductions. Then, when they met, he was oblivious to any method of introductions between a homeless person and him - - this upstanding and relatively well-off Chicagoan and visitor to the City by the Bay. After meandering through almost a dozen blocks -- still not aware of any valid reason -- and almost silently following this homeless person without a name, he came to a halt at a church. Yes, a Catholic Church. I guess, directly in the middle right side of the street.

The church, if it had displayed no name, could be taken for any other building. Of course, the church bell-tower provided some sort of a distinct feature, a different use. It could also be that the homeless was a disguised, an undercover Catholic priest, now ready to convert him to his flock. A Lutheran himself, mildly involved in his own church, he could be an easy prey. Certainly, he had to be easy catch for he still was unsure of this act of agreeing to follow this San Franciscan homeless which he soon would come to know as the priest or one of the priestly cohorts. The church's sign was visible, the façade looked okay. It was clean, absent of any decrepit material or begging for repairs or revealing an old and cold past. Just like the rest of the buildings surrounding this church. The door of the smaller -- one floor only -- building adjacent to the church opened up after the homeless' two soft knocks. A male, perhaps in his late forties or fifties, with curly black hair, now somewhat unruly from the day's activities, dressed in a faded black and gold distinctively 49er sweatshirt and grey, also worn sweatpants, opened the door, greeted the homeless guy with a broad smile and uttered the most likely usual greeting:

"Good afternoon, Sam." Sam stayed motionless like absentminded or lost for greetings, a reciprocation of sorts. "Yes, good afternoon. It's already four o'clock; very strange to see you this late on a Monday, following the last Sunday of the month what's happening, partner?"

I guess I was right -- a partner in the begging business, thought Edmund.

Edmund was not hurt that he was being ignored -- unceremoniously ignored. Both the man in the 49er-attire and the homeless man (still for now homeless man) had not acknowledged his presence in any typical or perhaps awkward fashion. Edmund waited and waited more. Well, he recognized that the homeless man had not yet answered the "what's happening" question from the 49er-dressed-and-undercover-for-sure priest.

Then, while certain there would be no answer and receiving an equally broad and warm smile, Edmund got the answer he had waited for. "Are you two together?" Both -- the homeless and Edmund -- nodded yes.

Addressing Sam and not losing sight of Edmund, the supposed priest added: "What is the catch this time? A Montgomery Street Executive businessman? A wealthy donor?" Edmund chuckled, while the homeless just smiled meekly. "C'mon, what's the deal, Sam?"

Now Edmund knew the disguised homeless had a name -- "Sam." How nice, a comfortable and cozy name. Sam replied: "No, he isn't San Franciscan. He's a tourist -- a very generous tourist." Sam paused and then followed with the clincher reply: "You know, I need your help. He wants to give me one-hundred dollars."

"One-hundred dollars? Hah, that's nice. Don't you know his name?" Sam shook his head -- indicating a perfect no. "Didn't you ask? The right mannered gent forgot to follow his own rule?"

The disguised priest's speech was supported by an Italian-type hand gesticulation, a traditional on-going ribbing, a lovely scolding. All in the same motion. Sam looked down somewhat meekly and somewhat mischievously. At least his contrite smile looked mischievous. Now directing his total attention to Edmund, the presumed priest offered his hand and said: "I'm Fausto Mancini -- the pastor of this church. And you sir? Gracing this encounter with your presence and taken for a ride by this man, Mr. Sam Williams."

Edmund appeared lost, Father Mancini rescued him: "And your name?" *Is this priest joking, is he a jester, or has he taken an afternoon shot of tequila?* thought Edmund. *Maybe he does comedy on the side.*

Okay, Edmund had the first guess revealed. The man with curly, disheveled hair was a priest without a habit. And he was jovial, plain old vanilla. Perhaps he was a successful apostle of the church. "My name is Edmund Conrad. I don't know why I am here with...." pointing to Sam he continued ... "now I know he is Sam. Yes, with Sam. I just followed him." Edmund hesitated, then said: "he said I had to meet you before I handed him a few bucks, my donation. I had no idea it would be to a church."

"Sorry for asking, are you uncomfortable with that? Money for the church?"

Edmund ventured no answer. He was the donor and required no justification for an offer from his hard-earned money. Usually nothing would floor him or cause any sort of stuttering. However, what had developed so far was news to him, and it came faster than he expected. "I don't know what to say." He paused and then decided to take charge: "Gosh it's no big deal, not a lot of money, anyway. What's the point? I just met you and I don't know anything about Sam. As far as I could tell he's..."

"A homeless? Anyone can say that. Of course, he is. But one with a significant and lovely difference. Thank God for that." Edmund was relieved the homeless had some credentials in the begging business. Father Mancini continued. "Let me share some details. Sam is what he is, a great human being." *He changed tones with such ease - from comedian and now to a preacher. Of course, he must preach his sermons.* Edmund's brain was racing with configurations of this priest's mode of conversation. The chat was definitely out of his league. "All the big money he comes to collect is dropped with me. He does have a place but not with the safe arrangements to keep money. The money is his for whatever the good things he does. I am like his bank. He drops money and gets money when he needs and asks. Meantime, we're friends and I love hearing his stories of mercy, which never exceed a dozen words."

"Thank you, thanks for sharing; now I know. Is Sam connected with your church?"

"No, he is not. He's his own boss and master. If you get what I mean, he's a servant of God even if he does not acknowledge it or tell it."

Edmund Conrad was not confused. Just surprised at becoming a witness to a warm if not a slowly developing intriguing story, by an intriguing and funny priest. Father Mancini was reading Edmund's conflict well and offered a more definitive thought: "No, Sam is not a 'homeless' by fate alone. Or by design, if there is some vocation or divine intervention in the mix." *Big words, philosophical statements I'm not used to; well, unless I'm in the company of Herbert,* thought Edmund.

Then, looking sideways at Sam and just to make sure his next question was appropriate, Edmund said. "Okay, that is a good summary of Sam's good character. Tell me more. I may like to hear

more descriptions or stories about Sam." In truth, Edmund had plenty of time. He was just enjoying this freelance tourist stroll through the city now with funny twists. Sam, however, appeared uncomfortable with the usual praise coming from Father Mancini and now piggy-backed by Mr. Conrad. He kind of slowly danced around as his feet tip-toed and slowly swirled. Both Father Mancini and Edmund Conrad took note of that, almost laughing. It had to mean many things, including Sam's apparent reluctance to hear additional praise.

Father Mancini put a softer spin in his story. "Well, Sam has a place to stay. He just chooses to be around those he knows he can help and get results."

Edmund's curiosity increased. He thought he would learn something that is rarely shared in normal conversations or everyday news and in an apparent safe environment -- near or at the door of a church, a house of God. Nothing that could go viral in social media was equally worth knowing. Yet, he was being introduced to Father Mancini only for a specific purpose -- Sam's purpose. Not as an invited guest for a chat or for a fact-finding story.

"I sense that Sam is ready to go, ready to continue his work. I have a little time. Do you care for some tea?"

Sam was ready to leave but waited to see if Mr. Conrad accepted the tea invitation or chose to walk back with him to the spot of their initial encounter. Seeing no immediate action, he looked at Father Mancini and hinted he had a question.

"I know, you're late and think I forgot you. I did not." Sam's smile was no longer meek. It was as broad as his eyes now revealed. "I have three bags for you. They contain good stuff; of course, with irrelevant expired dates. At least two bags of Lays potato chips are in the bags. Do you want to take some now or tomorrow? It does not matter that it is one more day old."

"Not now. I've got to catch up with other business. Randolph and me will come tomorrow morning. Thank you. Always thank you."

"Sure... I thank you, too." Sam, guessing Mr. Conrad would stay for tea, waved goodbye to Father Mancini and extended his two hands to Mr. Conrad's own hand, warmed it with a pious smile and vanished. Sam's hands looked as clean as his posture.

Sam was already on his way out when Father Mancini yelled at him: "If you show up after the seven-thirty Mass I will have warm pancakes and hot chocolate for both of you. Unless someone needs spiritual help. You know what I'm talking about." Sam knew it well. Sometimes Father Mancini would thank him for coming at the right moment -- interrupting him from tiring schmoozing -- the daily dose from old parishioners.

Now alone and still on the side walk, Edmund Conrad hoped Father Mancini would renew the offer for a cup of tea. *Not yet? he thought.* "You see, more than a year ago Sam was offered shelter at a large home subsidized by a Lutheran Church here in the city." Mr. Conrad's gaze almost froze -- *a Lutheran Pastor*, he murmured? "The Pastor had met Sam and also me at a charitable gathering. He became spellbound by Sam's heroics for being awarded the be-a-difference-man of the year recognition. It was a humbling thing at this low key and overly secular organization."

Father Mancini could not read the effect of his words on Edmund. Conrad's face had changed colors and expression. That caused Father Mancini to rush a concluding remark. "The Lutheran Pastor offered him a permanent shelter; modest as many shelters are, but a good shelter."

"Forgive me for interrupting," said Edmund Conrad while smiling and hoping Sam had not gone out so fast and away from his sight. No luck. "Can you tell me the name of the Lutheran Pastor?"

Then added: "Could he be someone by the name of Herbert Hawkins?"

"Yes," said Father Mancini with a surprised, mostly dumbfound look. "How do you know this? You just met Sam a few moments ago? Isn't it true?"

"I guess I can accept a cup of tea now. Is it still an offer?" Father Mancini smiled and allowed him to proceed.

"Of course! And are you sure you can have a long chat?"

Father Mancini's progressive smile was a little disconcerting for Edmund, so he concluded: "Why not? This must be part of your ministry. Yes?"

"Sure, come in."

As both walked from the door onto the narrow hallway Father Mancini explained: "Sam is truly unique. He's the best example of natural humility. I value this so much because it is the most difficult virtue for me to handle." Then, taking a breather, added: "Pastor Hawkins was also touched by Sam's transparent and virtuous behavior." He paused again. "So, even far away, you know Herb Hawkins?"

"Of course, I do. You don't know this but he married my daughter last Saturday."

Father Mancini stopped, looked straight into Edmund's eyes and said: "Really? What a small world! Of course, we're far away and yet close. Miraculous," retorted Father Mancini.

He chose the moment to explain the meaning of the three rooms surrounding the hallway. There was a little office with bookcases, a desk, two chairs and other memorabilia. Another small room had a couch, a single kneeling prayer pew, another modest size bookcase. The walls were covered with pictures of some icons,

including ones of two popes, and the prominent wooden cross hanging from the wall. The third room was a makeshift dining area with a dining table for four, five chairs. The dining room had a large opening in the wall that lead to a small kitchen. It had again a small counter with a sink and a faucet, two small cabinets with dishes, glasses, and a useful refrigerator. Other minor kitchen utensils completed the entertainment arrangement. Beyond these, there were two small bedrooms with a shared full bathroom.

Father Mancini excused himself and walked towards the kitchen where water was boiling. Conrad could tell, for the hissing from the kettle was intensifying in noise. Tea was served, sipped as they warmed themselves to some juicy revelations -- all about Sam.

"Sam rarely uses the shelter except for a nap. I guess during the day, as most occupants are out, he goes there to his room, takes care of things he needs to take care, including interacting with the impromptu shelter users. He even cooks occasionally. Like the food I set aside, food with labels showing an expiration date." Edmund Conrad was in authentic if not virtual listening mode, and signaled Mancini to go on. "You see, cans of ravioli, beans, uncooked pasta and other items. He shares the food with some people at the shelter and the others, his friends on the streets, under the freeways, in alleys and unused spots."

"I meant to ask you about the bags of food -- expired food value. Do you also feed the homeless?"

"Oh, those bags!? We, at the church -- I guess most churches perpetually ask their flock to bring food -- ask and receive non-perishable stuff and other items every last Sunday of the month. Yesterday was that Sunday. Most food is sent away to food pantries, shelters for battered women. You name it. However, we're careful in

not sending away food that show severely expired dates. Church volunteers sort it all on Monday."

"That's a shame for some food is still good, still edible" Edmund interjected.

"You're right. And I know of tons of food that are thrown away. Those dates are phony."

"How come?"

"Easy. Most dates reflect the merchandise turn over in stores. Not the shelf value. Besides some of these shelters receive government subsidies. Allowing expired date food does not sit well with the government. It's a catch twenty-two thing."

"So, some of the expired food is given to Sam?"

"Correct. Sam always comes early Monday. He was late this time and thought I would forget him."

"Does Sam attend church services? You call these services attending Mass?"

"No, he does not. I do not know if he's religious or what religion, if any, he belongs to. One thing I have noticed or caught him a few times doing is waiting for me when I return late from other errands. I catch him in the church, in those back pews, just thinking or meditating. He feels awkward when I catch him still, like enjoying a quiet moment."

"So, you never talked with him about religion."

"Never. It wouldn't matter. We both understand the language of silence and mutual respect. Deeds speak for ourselves."

Edmund Conrad was feeling that special spiritual lift. His eyes were fixated on every word Father Mancini uttered; like the eyes could listen or talk. Mancini continued: "I wish I could be as useful and relevant as he is."

"You like him?"

"Certainly, I do. It is easy to love and admire that human being."

"How did you come to know him? The same way as Herbert? At this gathering?"

"Oh, no. A long time ago. Let me see, seven or ten years ago. Maybe longer than that."

"It makes sense -- long ago. The way you two talk with or to each other, it conveys a long and solid friendship. Was he homeless then? No family?"

"Okay, that is a long sentence."

Edmund smirked a genuine smile; his lips revealed the difference between a smile and smirking.

"Let me get the order of things here. First with me: I was ordained at age thirty-two; in Boston. I'm a Dominican priest, you see." Edmund could not tell the difference between a Dominican priest or any other." Right before my hitting twenty-eight, knowing and living the ABCs of life and totally unsure what to do next, I decided to become a priest, to do things for others. Then fresh from being ordained I was assigned to teach at a Catholic High School -- teach and become the school chaplain."

Edmund intervened: "Do you do any teaching now? Pastors must be so busy and do not have enough time to teach?"

"No, I do not teach. In fact, after a few years I didn't feel fit to do that. The assignment was too easy and the students were smart, motivated, from balanced and upper middle-class families. I needed some challenge, I needed tough environments. You know, I was an idealist. One of the vows we are asked to take is humility. Idealists are rarely humble. Then, at my request, I transferred to a New York parish and a grammar school. I saw the light there because the area was an inner-city environment with poor working-class families."

Edmund interrupted father Mancini. "You are here now. Being an idealist, you found an environment to live your dream or your calling. What got you to come here? Pardon me for being nosy."

"No, I don't mind talking about me. I already know much about you. And, oh, and your cousin Herbert. Here is the rest of my story about being here. A few years later -- around my early forties -- another priest I had known before, recommended I come to San Francisco -- to a parish that needed someone with an Italian name and fit to work with a mix of rich and some people not so rich, border line poor. The community was changing."

"So, you speak Italian?" asked Edmund.

"Are you kidding? Because I said 'Italian name'? That was a joke: I just talk with my hands and a word or two. I'm happy, though. Stay with me, I'm close to getting to Sam. During those years, I was still idealistic, but not fond of rigid schedules. Being an assistant Pastor with some free time, fit my choices. I would venture to the areas where many homeless congregated. I felt I belonged there -- at least in my free time. That is where I met Sam. He was as dysfunctional as one can get. There is no need for glamorous details. I learned he had been in Vietnam, got wounded with shrapnel on his left side." He paused to give an example: "Did you notice the left side of his face? Some parts do not have beard. His body's left side has scars all over. So, even wounded but recuperated, he decided to rejoin until the war ended in the mid-seventies. He took odd jobs here and there but never settled in anything. His wife and child deserted him and his life went south. I mean ... they got tired of him. He came to San Francisco, joined some of his buddies, perhaps veterans from the service. Bad company. Vietnam ruined many good people. The carnage to which they were witness was also too much for their young minds. He disintegrated and homelessness became his life."

"Sad story. The nation will never know the true impact of vicious wars. Vietnam was one of them. Iraq is another one. We will never know." Edmund paused. Father Mancini appeared finished. Edmund still was a question or two away. "So, you met him in the dumps. How about his family? Did they reconnect? Does he receive government benefits?"

"As far as I came to know, he never tried to reconnect with his family. He never allowed me to address that subject. I respected his privacy. Yes, he receives Veteran benefits, but not as much as he should or is entitled to. He messed it up when he rejoined the second time. After all he had been wounded. In any case the meager benefits are gone by the third week. All to help his clients. If he had more, he would give more and to more people."

"The way I see, you are a hero. You helped him find himself and a way to be useful."

"With the exception of the hero thing, you're right on all the things you said. A miracle my friend?! No. He does his thing better than anyone else. He is like family without the usual visits or connections. In other words, I can say we are very close with few words."

The stories appeared too raw, too true but equally a blessing to Edmund Conrad. Father Mancini went on: "Back to the shelter -- the one Sam uses. The house accommodates close to eighteen people; or more on Winter days. The house is divided into four bedrooms, with two bathrooms for all. Each large bedroom, with bunk beds, sleeps six and the other is tiny. That's Sam's quarters. Even if he rarely sleeps there."

"And why does Sam do that and sleep on the streets?"

"I call Sam the Mother Teresa of the homeless. He's smart. But he is a true missionary without an official mission or a missionary

organization. It is during the night that he does his work: talks, asks, tells, instructs and above all, kind of influences behavior changes in those he knows can do it."

Father Mancini stopped to reconfigure his own question. "You mentioned you met him with another homeless. Right?" Edmund Conrad nodded yes. "That other homeless had to be Randolph, a former homeless man who was down on his luck and doing drugs. Now he's like an assistant to Sam. That is what I call them: Master and apostle." Both laughed. "Their mission -- well, I coined it a mission -- is to rehabilitate everyone that they come across. And they do this with true modesty. Only a few cops know the story. He threatens them to stay silent -- a small price for his heroics to stay on. Otherwise, he would run away. He's done that once before. The cops know better."

"So, Herbert learned about Sam and did his good deed towards Sam. Sam, by all measures, is someone that the world should know about," blurted Edmund Conrad.

"It has to be on Sam's terms. Sam is astute and knows the world so well. He hates politics, and he disdains charity for show or for tax write-offs. He's principled to the core."

Edmund Conrad rubbed his hands, reached for the rest of the tea and waved his head right and left two times. Father Mancini smiled, too. Then added: "it's getting late for you. Yet I'm curious. Herbert married your daughter at his church?"

"Oh, no. I live in Chicago. Actually, in a suburb of Chicago. He's married to my sister. My daughter is attending Berkeley to get her degree in law, she found the love of her life and decided to get married."

"I see, nothing unusual. America is so mobile. Are you returning to Chicago soon?"

"Not yet; next week. The whole family entourage from our area is going to Yosemite tomorrow. After that, we will travel along the coast to Santa Monica. And then return to San Francisco for just a day and a night before going back to Chicago. Just enough time to confront Herbert on extending a hand to Sam."

"That's good. I sense Pastor Hawkins has changed a bit since I first met him up close at that gathering. He appeared then as a self-absorbed religious person. He was well mannered, well dressed, like an executive. Now he's more engaged and detached from the formalities. Even his attire has changed."

"I know what you mean. I noticed that change, too. He's looser, far more gregarious, less guarded, less cautious. With the wedding thing and many guests -- out of town guests -- it was difficult to chat with him more intimately. I like his demeanor now. I will learn more next week."

"Where was the wedding ceremony? At Hawkins' church?"

"No, it was not. My daughter's fiancée, I mean that's her husband now, is of Italian descent and naturally Catholic. It was at his Catholic Church near the Golden Gate Park. It was a dual officiating thing. Very well done."

"I see, another miracle in ecumenical partnership. God must be smiling.... Me, too."

"I guess you're right. The world needs more unity and fewer divisions," replied Edmund.

Both appeared having had their fill of meaningful conversation. Anything beyond now would be superfluous chat. It was getting close to six pm, too. Edmund Conrad was surprised he had received no calls from his wife who after lunch decided to go shopping with the other two couples. Edmund thought that breaking away from the group, preferring to do free-lance walking through downtown, gave him the

better part. Thus, he experienced no regrets. Still he worried the phone had not rung. He excused himself for a moment, pulled the tiny *I-phone* from his shirt pocket, looked at it and noticed multiple messages: voice and text. He swung his head twice in disbelief. Then said: "Well you may have other souls to convert and I have to answer to my wife and our friends."

Getting the message, Father Mancini stood up. Edmund just murmured the word *souls*. He seldom used this or similar words in typical conversations. However, this was not a typical conversation.

"Well, I'm elated for having been exposed to small but real miracles. Of course, Sam -- like the miracle with you -- anything can be expected."

"It is not a big deal. I enjoyed talking with you."

Edmund Conrad nodded in some sort of agreement with the priest's thinking, then asked: "Can we exchange e-mail addresses? Do you e-mail?" He got a yes nod. "I also did enjoy your company and hospitality. And above all, now our being touched by Sam."

"Indeed, Sam has that talent and God given vocation. It was a blessing meeting you and I shall have a word with Hawkins once we meet again in two weeks."

"Do that. My wife and I are set to have dinner with him next week before we depart to Chicago. I'll grill him. Starting with a lie --- all about the homeless in San Francisco."

"Yes, homeless in the City by the Bay."

Before leaving Father Mancini's place, Edmund opened his wallet and extracted two fifty-dollar bills. "Look here. Please put this in Sam's treasury. Don't tell him a thing. You can do that, can't you?"

"Of course. On the other hand, I have a better idea. I will go out with Sam, check his work and buy a couple hamburgers for us, with French fries and coke."

"You're funny. Unlike Hawkins."

"By the way, before I let you go, where and how did you find Sam? Was he begging?"

"Not really. It was around one of these streets crossing Market and Mission. Like now, the afternoon was warm. There were lots of beggars; some did not look good at all."

"Never mind, you and I broke the ice. Tell the truth ... they looked dirty and may have annoyed people. I can take any comments, Conrad."

"Oh, I am not bashful in stating what I feel and what I saw. Many as you stated: disjointed, disconnected from the world. However, Sam was not. Actually, I found him with another fellow, both standing near the corner of those streets. They looked at me, smiling as a matter of fact. As you know, they did not dress like clean folks strolling on the street. Their smile caused me to be brave and ask a question. I was looking for a cigar shop that had been referred to me. They promptly told me where it was. In fact, they said: 'we are going in that direction. Follow us.' And I did; and I found the store. I thanked them and had the courage to ask them if they were homeless. Mind you, I did not ask them if they lived or worked nearby; but if they were homeless..."

"That is ironic. Well, you are a good, honest person, too."

"Thanks. They said they were homeless. At that moment I felt bad and meant to amend my error by fetching for my wallet. They just waited as my twenty-dollar bill caught their joy. Sam said 'please, buy your cigars and then follow us to a MacDonald's, buy us some hamburgers for our brothers that can't move well.' I did buy my stuff and then followed them to a MacDonald's. With twenty-five dollars I bought them over a dozen cheese burgers and bags of fries. The other fellow took the bags and left. I stayed temporarily with Sam until it

was time for me to go. Sam, with his eyes almost wet, thanked me and said: 'you're a good man.'"

"Oh, yes, he can't hide his charm all the time. Good story. Then you handed him the one hundred-dollar bill. Is that it?"

"You got it. As I showed him the bill, he hesitated with the palms of his hands up. Instead he asked me to follow him. I did and did not ask questions. I just let the events take me over. I have no regrets -- none whatsoever."

"Now you have another friend. Thanks for sharing the story. *Arrivederci*," finished Father Mancini. Edmund Conrad just saluted the affable and funny priest.



The story by Herbert Hawkins had concluded; Elvera was full of unusual emotions. "My Lord, my dear Lord. No wonder you are two peas in a pod. That was so wonderful."

"Indeed, we respect and admire each other. We are blessed with Sam, too," said Hawkins.

"No wonder that you both kind of adopted Sam."

"That is a good way to put the matter to a warm rest."

"Well, it is time to go. Walt must be worried, too."

"Are you cooking tonight?" asked Fausto Mancini.

"No way. I am full and we have good left-overs. Walt will not mind."

A Sunday barbeque at Elvera's

Sam takes the bait

*As we get older, we also get to be wiser.
 One watch costing \$300 dollars reads the same time as one costing \$30.
 Being alone in a house of 600 sq. feet is the same as in a
 house of 3,000 sq. feet.
 I hope that one day your (inner) happiness does not
 depend on material things.
 It does not matter if you fly first class or economy.
 You'll die if the plane falls and crashes.
 I believe that when we have friends, people to talk with,
 laugh with, sing with, this is happiness.
 -----Pope Francis (?)*

Two days before the party at Elvera and Walter's was to take place, Elvera received a large business type envelope with the sender's name of the University of the Bay Area. She was happy but not surprised by such receipt. Before opening the envelope, she suspected it could be a certificate of appreciation for their job at the

students' thesis project. Instead it contained a handwritten note from Professor Eichelberger and six separate sealed white envelopes with the participants individual names. The handwritten note from the professor was very complimentary of her efforts in keeping the participants motivated in their participation. She then opened her own envelope and read a generic typed letter, but enriched with handwritten personal notes from all the six students. The typed letter was rich in compliments and in promises from all students expressing their commitment to deliver professional and personal value during their lifetime. What charmed Elvera most was the many personal handwritten notes from each student had zeroed in on Elvera's own personality and impact on them. *"How thoughtful and dear!"* she thought. Walter got his own envelope once he arrived home. Both felt rewarded beyond belief.

Elvera recalled with joy that two weeks earlier she had followed Walter's urge to finally stage the thought-over invitation for a barbeque type brunch at their home on an early Sunday afternoon. Spouses of the participants would be invited as well. Herbert had said, and Fausto agreed, they would persuade Sam and Randolph to also come. Fausto even triggered some laughs as he volunteered to pray and cajole Sam to come – two actions in the same motion. Karen Summers had said she and her husband would not miss such an awesome gathering and the possibility of valuable debriefing, as she claimed her previous research expeditions would benefit by the experience gained from the project. Thus, Elvera counted with her fingers how many would join on that late Spring, early Sunday afternoon celebration. If everybody would come, she estimated a number close to a dozen. Herbert and Fausto would take a pass on travelling by BART; instead, Herbert planned to drive with his wife

and Fausto, and perhaps Sam, if he finally succumbed to Elvera's bait. Elvera and Walter were excited as a crowd of that size would make the matter far better -- not too many neither too few.

Elvera and Walter were experienced hosts for a rowdy crowd of their large family of two daughters, one son, and their spouses and five grandchildren -- a cozy and self-serve crowd. Small gatherings of two to three couples were the other homogenous crowd, where simple menu discussions found collective agreement. However, a diversified crowd as the one on the agenda, posed some challenges that required better thinking. Not even Walter's golf buddies or other types of food - grilling aficionados would trigger any special treatment. They were at times noisy and happy fellows.

"Vera, cooking for this well mixed but small crowd will be a breeze. Don't know their tastes but couldn't care less. What we have for them could also satisfy the Bishop."

"Bishop? When was the last time you did that? Fed a Bishop? Father Lukas, yes."

"Not at home, but when we helped the Knights of Columbus on a fund-raising party. The Bishop was there. As far as I know, someone claimed the Bishop ate well."

"Why not eat well and enjoy good food? Bishops are human, have bodies begging for nourishment. Did you expect them to fast, to be party-poopers, or show-offs?"

"Honey, don't take me so seriously! That was in jest."



Max arrived with his wife, Katheryn; the first to show their faces. Right after were Karen and her husband Arthur Summers. Max was prompt in introducing Katheryn to Karen and then to Arthur. The two couples quickly became no strangers. Arthur said that he was thrilled to come to meet the happy, down-to-earth human being, who could also tell good jokes. Walter took the compliment and proceeded to shake it off with just mild smiles. Instead, he invited Arthur and the arrived guests for some drinks -- whatever was in the ice chests and on the tables.

"Walt, go easy on the drinks. Our guests just arrived and let's take care of other things first," pontificated Elvera.

"Okay!!! As usual, you have the first and the last word," answered Walter. "In this case, fellows, once you are finished with Vera's niceties join me near the grill. Isn't that right?" The friends nodded yes and waited for Vera's house cleaning instructions.

After Elvera staged the house tour, the guests arranged their seating on the patio not too far from the grilling assembly on an "L" shape granite counter. Besides a five-burner grill, a rotisserie skewer completed the grilling toy -- Walter's favorite grilling tool. The counter assembly sported a bar sink on top, a small refrigerator under the counter, space saver cabinets to house a trash can and grilling utensils, and other conveniences. The yard was large, with simple garden architecture whose accents leaned more on efficiency than looks. The grounds were covered either with decorated concrete or clay tiles for orientation and concrete slabs were positioned to lend company to tree and flower pots. The tree pots were of concrete aggregate, but large and deep enough to offer small fruit trees a good habitat. A large and rectangular patio cover was strategically positioned away from the grilling area and almost in line with the family and entertainment room. Under the patio cover, one could see

and enjoy the comfort of sectional patio furniture. All were rattan items, consisting of one large lounge sofa, two chairs with ottomans and one coffee table. A portable gas heater was creatively standing at the corner of the sheltered patio. The sets of patio tables and chairs, made of polished wrought iron, spread themselves harmoniously in the various sections of the yard. Anyone with good knowledge of Elvera and Walter's living style could relate the outside living to their personality -- nice, harmonious, clean and efficient. There was no pool that could entertain their children, grandchildren, or even guests. A surprise that when explained, gained the approval of the visitors. The hosts feared safety issues, which they preferred not to manage. A good size and efficient jacuzzi surrounded by Japanese vegetation did the swimming honors instead.

Katheryn chose Vodka with cranberry juice, also a favorite of Elvera. Max took a Corona and Karen joined her husband with glasses of Chardonnay. Walter followed Max's choice. Actually, Walter had almost consumed his Corona. The ice tub was full to the brim.

"Dear friends, we planned for a fun gathering and good food and drink. Vera showed you our modest home and I showed you the way to the fountain of joy. This first serving of drinks is on the house. The others are on your own?! Relax, 'on-your-own' means you will take care of yourselves from this point forward. If your men are the old-fashioned types, they'll take care of their ladies. Vera will take care of herself." He chuckled as the others laughed. "You'll stay thirsty by your own choice. Therefore, don't hesitate to serve yourselves."

"Don't listen to Walt. He always makes this noise. He is a peach and will make your drinks with gladness. However, he has a point -- please feel at home; we have a nice afternoon ahead of us."

A good size tray of avocado slices topped with olives, pickles and roasted red peppers was on display, together with trays of assorted cheeses and smoked salmon. Little slices of roasted sourdough bread brushed with fine olive oil and crackers were tucked in well decorated and Spanish-themed trays. The Betancourt's really knew how to entertain a la middle-class style -- Walter's only class he knew. No upper class or no tailgate entertainment. That was reserved for A's tailgate parties.

The early arrivals -- not really early-birds -- had arrived around the time suggested. The others, for one reason or another, were still at least thirty minutes away. Herbert was not an overly cautious driver. Yet, this part of the Bay Area was not his friendly repetitive destination. Even on a Sunday. Actually, the guests claimed that Castro Valley was in the middle of a safe and easy to find destinations; on the crossroads of three well-travelled highways -- 580 to 80, 880 and a few miles away from 680. Elvera already knew that Randolph would be a no-show. And Sam opted to come by himself via stopping in Oakland in order to check on his missionaries of the street under the stars near the freeway underpasses of downtown Oakland. Actually, Sam's connections and homeless empire extended to the East Bay and some east Contra Costa communities. Elvera, although the hero in cajoling Sam to also show up and rub shoulders with other human beings, thought that her prayers had not been strong enough to nudge the good Lord to perform another miracle on the go.

"Sorry folks. We have some guests dropping off their intentions in having a good time with us."

"Who is not coming or who is coming late?" asked Max.

"We knew by yesterday, that Herbert's wife, ironically also named Katheryn, could not come as they were surprised with last-minute out-of-town guests. Herbert has said that, no matter what, he would come and claimed out-of-town guests were no match for us. We also knew from Fausto that Randolph would not come. That's it. If Sam – the miracle-in-progress – comes, we will ask for the details."

"Really, too bad. For I was dreaming of meeting this modern-day Mother Teresa," said Karen.

"Not only do we feel like an illusion, meeting and chatting with this good man, but Randolph and Sally as well." reiterated Elvera. "I have faith he'll show up. This time he will."

Max added that he barely knew Sam through the three or so events where Sam was cast as the winner of the good Samaritan or "Be-a-Difference-Rainbow" foundation winner. He was real and at the same time an enigmatic fellow. "From what Fausto tells, Sam is letting his guard soften a bit. In fact, we well remember his most recent thank-you speech had far more words and creative messages than his three-worded thank you on the year before."

"Yes, you are right. When I spoke with Fausto at length, confirming who was coming or not, Fausto said that Sam's aging is finally modifying his stance. He claims that Sam has concluded he cannot do it all. Make no mistake; he'll never change his living environment for anything even remotely close to ours. Never! But he also concedes that feeding his buddies with food and protection and, ... and preaching 'get off-drugs,' is a task that is slowly running its course."

"Thanks, Vera," said Arthur. "Sam's world is so distant from ours." Elvera nodded in agreement. "Even Karen tells me what she has learned from you. Can you add more?"

“Of course, I can. Being with him, even for a short time, for he is always looking to escape us, does not trigger tears. But afterwards, reviewing his heroics (he never says it is heroics) he claims with such candor that *if I do this it is because I can ... and I did it. It's not a big deal!*” Feeling inner emotion taking hold of her, Elvera stopped, rubbed her eyes with her right hand and proceeded: “*It is never out of my way. I love sharing the little I possess. For my buddies, it is more than what they have.*’ That is a typical phrase of his.”

“Wow!!! So, Fausto, the priest, is his guide, his spiritual guide,” continued Arthur.

“Fausto fills that role and more. However, both barely entertain long chats. They see each other almost every day; yet, Fausto respects Sam’s aloofness. Almost like the aloofness of a businessman. Fausto, a very happy and gregarious servant of the church, thinks the chemistry is in the actions, the mutual trust, and the space in between them.”

“So, he depends on Fausto for guidance and material stuff. What else?” inserted Katheryn.

“Let me see what I remember well. Sam needs no guidance, no help or no nothing. Fausto met him years ago, many years ago when Fausto did rounds through the Tenderloin, in downtown San Francisco. He met Sam, exchanged some odd or casual talk; and then they stuck with each other like glue. But this is what glue did – acceptance of each other – with no agreements. Once Sam calculated Fausto was real, he sought the most discrete way to connect with him as needed. Again, actions spoke volumes. Fausto was happy and let his luck roll and roll; until Sam sought Fausto to hold his money from begging. By then, and this perhaps gleaned from Fausto’s shrewd covert tactics, Sam gave up drugs. What followed was a natural progress in achieving moderate but measurable success. Money grew

to support the buying of food and other stuff the homeless need daily." All were enjoying the little Vera knew and shared. Sensing that, Vera continued. "Sam being clean of drugs, allowed him to apply his own medicine on others. That is, he started a silent crusade to diminish drug trafficking and drug use. Money saved, needed to be kept. Where? Bank accounts? Handling a bank account would be too complicated for Sam, too messy, at least at that junction."

Turning to his wife, Max said: "Fausto acts as the banker."

"How nice. Everybody wins," concluded Katheryn.

"Indeed, Katheryn. This is the typical saga of success begetting success," affirmed Elvera.

"Another question: besides what you said, how does Sam operate?" asked Arthur.

"Nowadays, Sam, with his contacts in our foundation, like Herbert Hawkins, the Lutheran minister, was granted a room in a shelter run by the Lutherans. At first, he refused to use it for his own convenience. Later on, he relented and finds some rest there between his errands in his territory." Elvera paused while the others processed the new emerging good news. "All of these factors, almost unspoken, are breaking Sam's barriers of personal insulation."

"Thus, he promised to join you today and mingle like a brother with us," stated Karen.

"You've got it. It nudged him to respect us the same way we respect his freedom. No guilt feelings. Just the notion that we value him as much as his friends value him. There is no interference on his mission, if it is a mission. I told him: we all can be of value to one another. Or like employees, at times, influence bosses."

"You said that? Like a motivation moment?" retorted Arthur.

"Just like that." Now turning to Max: "you don't mind me saying this; but I chose an appropriate moment of solitude and asked God to

intervene, not for pride but to expand His reach.” She held her tears. “And, He delivered. Unless we get a call from Sam saying he had to help someone in need. But I did my part; the rest belongs to God.”

All got up and walked around the yard. Walter thought that Herbert and Fausto would be arriving soon. Indeed, the doorbell rang at the door, bringing their attention towards the house.

“Halleluiah. You arrived, and no Sam!” blurted Elvera.

“No Sam, but he will come. He said he will. He called me from the train and needed someone to pick him up. I do not know the station and we did not want to come late. Thus, when he arrives someone needs to get him,” stated Fausto.

“I will do that.” said Arthur. “I want to benefit from the miracle.” Upon being asked about the station, Arthur said: “I know the station quite well. Just ensure he knows what I look like.”



Fausto and Herbert greeted the other guests. Herbert said: “It is good to have female guests in this gathering -- like you -- Karen and Katheryn. I feel bad my wife could not come.”

Katheryn retorted: “I hope Max keeps me in the loop. I heard so much about you folks that benefits my transition into the retirement age.” Max, Fausto, Herbert and Arthur gave notice they still worked for a living. Karen dismissed her almost faux pas.

“Welcome; welcome.” said Elvera. Then added, “Walt, we can do this again; can’t we? Like having another barbeque party soon?”

“We can do this again or give them the keys to the house -- like an Airbnb thing. Without fees!” Those who heard Walter’s joke felt it

was too intellectually funny -- thus laughing their lungs and hearts out.

"What happened?" asked Herbert. "I did not hear the joke."

"Never mind, Herb. That was another one from Walt," finished Max.



"Where can I help? I know Arthur... that is your name ... right?" Arthur nodded yes and Herbert continued. "Arthur is picking up Sam. Sam knows what you look like. Don't ask questions. Act normal."

"What's the fuss? We both are human beings. Right?"

Herbert replied with no hesitation. "I apologize for the quick advice. But there is a reason for me saying that. We all tend to be kind and useful. Patronization comes along with our manners." All were still puzzled. "If he talks, talk too; if he does not say a word, say nothing. Once he gets here, we ambush him. Get it?"

"The way you put it or place him, it is quite like talking with a nerd from Mars. I will do my part. Don't worry fellows; I will pretend not to ruin the party."

"Sorry, Arthur if I hurt your feelings. It was not meant to. However, it is proper that someone like you -- he does not know -- picks him up. Sorry again!"

"Don't worry. I understand or understood in a few exchanges that in spite of this man's great deeds there is a caveat. I will remember it, for I want to meet this man up close."

Arthur departed for a twenty-minute round trip to the Bart station in Castro Valley. The others joined Walter and shared in his good assortment of liquor; though the men preferred wine and beer

and his great zingers. Walter was in great spirits because he felt at home with this new set of friends and acquaintances. *Change is good for you*, he mumbled to himself.

"Let me see ... Sam is converted and Randolph is gone or will be gone." Said Walter. "You are a miracle Father Mancini. It was due to happen. It was due."

"Walt, if my memory serves me well, I am going to use an analogy -- the gospel you used with the professor. Do you remember that scene when you reprimanded the professor?"

"No, I do not remember it. I had to be drunk then..."

"I know you remember; you're just pulling my leg. The point here is that we never do or achieve something big alone. Others, named or invisible, play roles in the transformation of something big, something impactful. Everyone plays a role. However, Sam played a role on his own, still to be proven transformation. This must have been achieved based on the experiences with himself as much as with us. Granted, we did provide help with altruistic purposes and honorable ideas."

Fausto continued. "You called me Father Mancini, didn't you?" Walter said he did. "What was the deal?"

"Because I respect you a lot beyond being friends. That is all."

"Okay, Mr. Betancourt, I respect and admire you as well. Calling me Fausto sounds a lot better."

"You're right. We are even."

"Good idea. Now to Sam ... let's have him feel the comfort of something that he was far from being a part of. Let him find his place in this gathering. I plan to have a good time and Walt is a good cook and Vera is tops on the list. Let's celebrate some good things in life. What do you say Max? You brought your wife, too. What a treat. What a gift, Katheryn!"

Katheryn smiled but stayed motionless. Max displayed just pure pride.

Father Mancini continued and directed his comments to all. "I am going to have a drink. You, Herb, just drink wine and not much more. You'll do the driving and need to stay sober. We cannot afford to have the police fine two members of the church, including an emissary of Mother Teresa." He paused and then said: "Thanks, Vera for staging this thing."

"It was not my idea. It was Walt's."

"Then let's drink to Walt. Everyone, lift your glasses!"

"Did you drink anything before we came, Fausto? Too much wine in church? If it is, no more booze for you." exclaimed Pastor Hawkins.

"I guess we are in a great mood for chatting and drinking. Walt already preached the command that we have to help ourselves to drinking. He did the first serving. Now, can you tell us something about Randolph? His going away from Sam and San Francisco?" asked Max.

"I can, but I prefer Sam to tell it. It may help his motivation to share. It is a good theme and a necessary answer. Can we do that? Wait for him?" All agree they could and would.



"What do you consider a good theme in the Catholic Church?" asked Arthur.

"Nothing about the sins of my Church! March-Madness is over, University of Virginia won, the Giants continue to flounder in their

home opener, the Warriors are hot. I know, I know Walt loves his A's. Anything A's and Raiders!"

"Well, if one is serious about religion, the Catholic Church exists because there are sins and sinners. The way I read the gospels that Jesus preached, He came to the world because of the sinners; the others were already on their way to heaven. Don't you agree? They had purchased their tickets. Right?" Max, the agnostic who had read more books about religions, talked with authority and not sarcasm, they surmised.

Fausto intervened; he had to, for he had started the hinted themes. "For those that do not know Max, may find his statement ironic or wrapped in sarcasm. For you, Karen and Arthur, Max has read more material on religion than Herb and I have done in preparation to become religious servants. He did that for different reasons; yet he did it. Now, about the Catholic Church and its sins, it is a fact that makes me pause and dig for valid answers. And since we had that meeting with students of Theology, Philosophy, etc. last month talking about the Catholic Church is no mystery. Yes, we have sinned in many ways -- in the past, not distant past and in the present. It keeps us humble, at least it should."

It was a lengthy confession that others felt free to talk about. Katheryn took the first step. "Fausto, I know about you, logically from Max. Likewise he admires you for being authentic. I am not a professed Agnostic but respect my husband and follow him. However, I can think and make decisions by and for myself. For instance, I know enough about the Catholic Church. Particularly since your Pope John ... yes, the XXIII, the nice round face chubby Pope, your church has become more open, more gregarious. You made tons of progress towards conciliations not only to other religions but to the world itself. You have and continue to permeate in the life of society --

modern and old society -- by your hands in many facets of life. At every turn we read about Catholics here, and Catholics there. You deliver a tremendous amount of religious vibrancy in many things you do."

Katheryn stopped and then asked if she was extending herself so much, like invading dangerous territory. She got the message that her inspired words should be said. "Good, thanks. However, the ugly moment or stage you are suffering from is also of your own. I mean the sex scandals caused by bad priests, human beings that commit sins, the way you describe grave errors. We all make mistakes. Everybody does. So, the church through transactions in matters of the spirit, of some sort of divinity, are also run by humans. And we know what humans are and do at times. In part your faithful think that by dressing in special clothes and displaying special collars, you would become saints on the go. That is the problem that the faithful mismanage -- expectations from you and none from them."

"You are so correct, Katheryn," replied Fausto. "This in part should be told to our parishioners. Many have this illusion that we are or are supposed to be saints -- all the time. The other thing I agree is that we should be accountable and held to a higher level, higher standards. No tip toeing around... and should get out when we mismanage our mission."

"I agree," added Herbert. "We should be held to higher examples."

"Now that you allowed me to go on, let me add a few ironic remarks," asserted Katheryn. "Pedophilia is bad because it deals with minors, mostly innocent and green young people. It is violating their innocence, their trust. However, it happens in all sectors of society. I suppose in more segments of society than in the Catholic Church, particularly in schools, particularly in the schools' sports activities; as

well as within families. You name it. But listen to me on this point. I am going to make a comparison with a large banking institution I worked for twenty plus years. Yes, the big Bank of America. The comparison is back in the late seventies and early eighties.”

She caught her breath and looked at the listeners with keen attention. They had reciprocated with obvious curiosity. “During that period, banks -- all banks -- were consolidating operations at a fast pace. Like closing branch units, buying smaller banks or merging with larger institutions. Bank of America, being the biggest then, was in the middle of this fever; yet, they moved very slowly. Wells Fargo Bank, BofA’s nemesis, took no prisoners, and led on the changes. And, by that, they became the darling of Wall Street. Are you seeing where I am going? Like comparing Bank of America, an original and vibrant institution, ubiquitous to the core, with the Catholic Church? Both huge and with enormous presence; yet slumbering along.”

“Here is the comparison: At that time, Wells Fargo Bank identified what areas, what branches to consolidate or close. In two years, they had their plan executed to perfection. They received a lot of bad press and moved on. BofA, instead must have done the same research and developed an action plan. However, they did in installments, like during eight to ten years, and got bad press for that long. Can you see the agony and the time wasted? Wells Fargo did it quickly and zipped through the market place with very few scars. BofA? Well, you get the picture.”

“The way I match your comparisons is that the Catholic Church should have handled the problem with pedophilia like Wells Fargo Bank with branch closures! Quickly and with determination,” interjected Pastor Hawkins.

“Exactly! The Catholic Church, throughout the world, because they are so global, should have recognized that too much smoke had

to have come from real fires.” Katheryn paused, and turning to Father Mancini, asked: “when did this thing of pedophilia in the church start?” Fausto said it was at the turn of the century. “Here we go; we are talking about over a dozen years. And now the other parts of the world are surfacing with the bad news. By the time this finishes, it is like an eternity. It is like the priests’ scandals are on-going events.”

“I told you Fausto,” said Herbert. “The reformation is over, over four-hundred years old. Now, your church is taking another beating; instead they should, as Katheryn said, have addressed the problem right away, admitted they made mistakes, dealt with it, made reparations, fixed and got it over with. I have come to admire the Catholic Church -- so universal and relevant.”

“Thanks Herb. I know and I pain from the matter. Still the Church is lucky, very lucky. Although there have been some exaggerations, there are many cases or examples that have not come to the surface. Many of the abused never filed charges. They most likely suffered, dealt with the pain, and then moved on with their lives. I fear more for the number that did not come out with their sufferings and legitimate complaints. Well, God will help. But we must do better.”

“Thanks, Katheryn, for such dramatic but very useful enlightenment,” concluded Elvera. “Okay, let’s choose another subject. Walt is right, we must refresh our glasses and enjoy the appetizers.”

“It was my pleasure! I have admiration for the Catholic Church.”

Noise came from the side yard gate. Arthur and Sam had shown up -- happy.



"Welcome dear Sam. You look good. And thanks for joining us."

Sam did look good -- a far cry from homeless attire. Nothing upscale -- whether casual or outdoor party dressing. His pants were of a faded and worn corduroy grey, matched by a black "V-neck" sweater, also faded with grey sneakers. He brought no cap to cover his head, still showing healthy dark and sandy hair now cut almost crew cut style; with subtle voids on the side. Perhaps someone of his homeless nation must have cut it at a YMCA bathroom. His beard was noticeably two weeks old, equally revealing shades of grey. He had turned sixty-two; thus, his posture was indicative of any man that age. He looked somewhat less old than when doing his thing at his environment. He was presentable; meaning he respected his invitation as one good guest would.

Sam directed himself towards Walter. Both, spontaneously, greeted each other with their right-hand knuckles and laughed. A greeting the other guests took notice. Sam then glanced at the other guests spread around the terrace. Elvera, seeing the guests almost begging for a good transition to introductions, said: "Okay you all know Sam or heard of him. Let's introduce ourselves to him so that he can feel at home. Can we do that?" Everyone nodded with relief. "So, let's start with the folks guarding the grill and booze in the bar area." All beckoned with gusto, including Sam.

"Well, I started and I introduced myself to Sam already as I picked him up at the station. By the way, Herb, good description of me. Sam had no fears jumping in the car. He guessed he was not being kidnapped." Herbert offered a contrite smile. "One more time, my name is Arthur Summers." Elvera waved Arthur to complete the introduction. "Am I supposed to say what I do for a living?"

Elvera telegraphed a sure yes. "I am an attorney by trade; family law and preparing myself for the transition to the good life of retirement within a few more years."

Elvera was all smiles with Arthur's long introduction. "Thanks Arthur!"

Next, and near the grill, was Father Mancini. Fausto waived his right hand and said "Hi!"

Next, the grill master followed suit with his held right hand and said "Hi, here."

Elvera, following the circle, just smiled and passed her turn to Herbert, who prompted the same greeting as Fausto. Karen was effusive with her smile at Sam and said: "My name is Karen Summers; married to that gentleman over there, preparing himself to invade my territory. Don't you think so? Like Vera and Walt? Both semi-retired are invading each other's space -- time and real space." Elvera dismissed Karen's truth and hinted for her to tell what she did. "Okay; I am a free-lance writer, get paid to do what I do and perhaps I will write about the professor's project and this gathering today. No, I do not take pictures. I will, but will not share them at all."

"You better not; unless we consent," said Max.

After the laughing and the teasing came Katheryn's turn. "My name is Katheryn and married to this lovely man; yes, on my right. I was in the retail banking business for over twenty years and now I am a permanent consultant to a laborers' retirement fund; that is, making sure their savings are responsibly managed and invested."

"Hi, I am Max and like all of us, proud to know Sam. He is someone to be proud of; it is an honor being around him." Tears were about to run from all guests' eyes. Sam just looked down towards the ground.

"Very good, very good. Now that we know each other, let's make the train run. Walt will explain how we stage the grilling. Some of you already savored his grilled sausages. Help yourselves with more of the other appetizers and drinks, too. Remember, help yourselves." Turning to Sam she asked him what he wanted to drink. Sam chose coke and fetched one from the ice bucket near Walter. "Now, Sam, join me in the kitchen. Okay, Sam?" Sam did not wait a second; he promptly followed Elvera.

Walter explained how the barbecue would evolve. "I have here four glass trays with the items to be grilled. You see ... the typical vegetables for grilling, which includes cut pineapple, a tray with small cuts of chicken breasts and thighs, another one with seafood, like scallops and tiger prawns, and another with cuts of pork loin. I have here two bowls of liquid dressing and two canisters of dry herbs; also, garlic salt and pepper if desired. Got it?"

"I do not get it, Walt," said Max.

"Okay, Max, you are new to my grilling, and I will explain." The others were relieved that a genuine explanation would surface. "Other than grilling hamburgers and hot dogs, all of us have different taste buds. All of you can create your grilling items by using these skewers --- bamboo skewers." The teacher was getting the students' attention. "You will prepare your own or tell me what you wish. Or I may grill, individually, all items and then you will choose what you want, afterwards."

"For instance," said Herbert, "I can choose a skewer with the fish and the vegetables or wait for you to grill all separately and then we can serve ourselves?"

"I guess we are getting there. Anyone with the same idea?" said Walter.

"In this case I will choose what Herb chose but with chicken instead. Can you make my skewer with chicken and vegetables?" voiced Katheryn. Walter said it was fine and doable.

The others, including Max, Fausto, Arthur and Karen instructed Walter to grill the items separately and then avail themselves of the good stuff as they pleased, possibly a piece of each. Walter said that was a good choice.

Meanwhile Elvera was explaining to Sam what she had to accompany the grilled items. "I've baked lima beans with celery, mushrooms and thinly cut carrots. I added some cubed tomatoes just to give color. I also have in the oven ..." Elvera opened the large gas oven "... ten ears of corn on the cob, you can see, nicely wrapped in foil paper, which I previously rubbed with a little salt, pepper and butter." Sam was happy for he guessed that Elvera would give him chores.

"Can I help you in any way, Mrs. Betancourt?"

Elvera thought that the progress she had achieved with Sam should be extended to other areas. "Sam, look at me. If you call me Mrs. Betancourt, I will call you Mr. Williams. Can you see?" Sam said he comprehended. "Call me Vera and I will call you Sam. Is this a deal?" Sam reluctantly agreed, stating it would be difficult for his habits had been ingrained for years. Elvera said: "Just try, Sam. Just try. Okay?"

"Mrs...., I am sorry, V...era, it will take time for me to get used to calling you by your first name." Regrouping himself he said "this is a very nice and big house. Your family must come here often."

"Sam this is a good house, built on more than one-acre lot. We purchased it thirty years ago and had practically no neighbors. Now we have nothing but new developments. Walt added almost two thousand square feet, up and around, added an adjacent two car

garage and a small workshop. He likes to entertain himself with his hands. You know, besides playing golf." Sam was excited with the warm and logical explanations coming from Elvera.

"The outside is large, nicely decorated and built. I am happy for you. You are a very nice lady."

"Thanks Sam. Beyond the patio and fun area, we have about a half-acre in the back separated by a latticed fence, which is also separated by shrubbery. There, Walt grows his vegetables. He loves to grow his own legumes. He spends hours and hours. There is a garden tool shed nicely surrounded by fruit trees."

"Thank you, Vera for the explanation. I also remember my grandpa's little plot in Southern Georgia. I loved hoeing with him." Tears came to Sam's eyes. Elvera turned away for he remembered his grandpa and said little about his mother and father or the rest of his family.

"Sam, you can join the guests. I will ask you to help me when the rest is ready. Okay?"

"I prefer to see the vegetable garden. Can I do that instead? Call me when you need me. Okay?" Elvera was happy Sam was finding bridges to his past. She thanked the Lord.



The guests were already finding their niches -- spread around two patio dining tables and/or keeping company to Walter who dazzled them with stories about his A's and Raiders. They knew his golf scores were high, although he took the accolades in stride.

Elvera came from the kitchen with a large white business type envelope. All looked at her and at the envelope she was waving.

"Folks, please pay attention to something very important I have for you. This envelope, from professor Eichelberger, arrived here last Friday afternoon. It was addressed to me and, when I opened it, I found individual envelopes for each one of us that participated in the students' thesis project."

"Wow! How nice. What else?" asked Karen.

"Oh, a letter from the professor saying I was so good and smart by influencing you all to be good Samaritans. Am I not smart? Like Walt?" Walter laughed almost to the point of choking. She continued. "Just a thank you from him. Why don't you open your own envelopes, read the message and decide if we should have some kind of debriefing?"

Elvera distributed all of the envelopes. All appeared very concentrated in the reading – one time, a second time and then lifted their heads towards Elvera. She then said: "So, what do you think? Any reason to say anything? Or drink and debrief?"

Karen broke the silence. "I like what these young people did. Very classy. However, I see no value in any kind of debriefing. It appears that what happened was good; the students valued our input and now they show credible gratitude. I'd rather learn more about ourselves and validate Walt's great cooking. Well, it is just my opinion."

Max kind of seconded the motion as if it was a motion on a real meeting and waived his glass of wine. The others nodded agreement with a thumbs-up approval -- a definite sign that, the motion by Karen, passed.

Fausto added. "How about you Mr. Chef Walt? Anything different?"

Walter thought over and then said. "Vera gave me the letter when I came home last Friday. I read it, thought about the various handwritten messages on that kind of official stationery and I felt good, emotionally good. First class! The guy who asked me the first question was very thoughtful. I like that young man." Walt stopped, wiped his cheeks with the edge of his hand and stayed unusually pensive. The others dared not to question him further.

Elvera intervened. She went to the kitchen and returned with Walter's letter. "Well, that young man that Walt almost scared the pants out of, wrote an emotional message." She proceeded in reading it: "I would love to adopt you as my grandfather. I never knew my maternal grandfather and the paternal one was not that kind to me. Thus, I learned nothing from either. You could inspire me in life. You are so lovely raw and credible. The world is better because of folks like you. Thanks grandpa."

"Let me start my grilling. My debriefing is done," said Walter.

"Certainly, we are done. We all behaved as '*Be a difference rainbow*' members," concluded Max.

"Thanks, people. Let's resume the fun." Said Elvera.

They all walked towards their chosen spots and proceeded to restart the fun.

"Max, I learned that your grandfather was an Atheist and activist in labor causes," started Karen politely in her desire to know and create solid intellectual talk. She also felt that Max was a good un-parochial dialoguer, as her friend Elvera had hinted one time.

"Yes, yes and no. Let me explain. He was not an open activist but supporter and representative of laborers' causes. He fought for workers causes, for labor relations justice. As an Atheist, from the first time I understood these labels -- religious, Atheist, oblivious to

religion, not caring about anything socialism, or just anything, I followed him as an obedient but silent atheist. I guess I followed with my heart. I remember him always bragging about the value of Atheism, in relation to capitalism versus communism. By then I would come to understand that there were two sides.”

“Sorry for invading territory that is more a private than open field. However, if you don’t mind, can you elaborate?” Karen asked.

“Not at all.” Max offered a mild smile, was happy to entertain conversation on a matter dear to him; and in this case, it was with an interlocutor that was credentialed in exploring human life and substantive human stories. In fact, he liked her on the first day they were together on that joint project -- the professor and his students research for exam thesis. “I love and always find satisfaction in clearing up what I view being and existing some misconceptions. My grandfather loved me a lot and thought I would be a follower of his doctrine.” Karen smiled happily. “However, observing and enjoying my father and my mother’s neutral views and my Uncle Fredrick’s way of living, I decided to love him back, but not to espouse his culture. For instance, he was a fan of Karl Marx, but not necessarily of communism as a whole. He felt communists were brutal and meant to exercise excessive power over the masses as much as capitalism exercised economic power by deception. So, fighting for workers’ rights only occurred on neutral ground.”

By then, Fausto and Herbert had joined the conversation. Walter was happy with his beer and seeing the master pieces of his grilling coming to fruition.

“Can you break this in segments?” asked Herbert.

“Yes, I can. Whether you are an Atheist or neutral in anything like religion, what matters for real people who care about their rights, is to fight for these. However, capitalism has a way of misguiding or

misleading people. It finds obstacles, creates economic disparities and then teases people with table crumbs. In Reagan's time, it was taken as "trickle-down" economics or politics. The rich get richer as long as there are some food leftovers for the workers, for the bottom line of society. Can you see the point? Certainly, I am exaggerating the reality for there are many, many people in business that do the right thing. And these are never targeted by activism. Justice must be made here. Nevertheless, let me tell you ..." Max stopped to rearrange his thesis ... "for those of you who remember economics in school must recall Adam Smith's theory on capitalism." Most gave an affirmative nod. "If Adam Smith would return from the grave, he would be appalled by the deceit of the economic and financial powerhouses at the moment. His doctrine of free capital was meant to involve everyone and not the elite -- the manipulators of value and money. Smith felt if capitalism or free markets were done right, all classes would benefit, and the tide would rise for all -- for all." Max stopped and then said: "I want to answer Karen's question about my grandfather and not about politics. Otherwise, she is going to think I am an agitator. I have enough labels that I want socialism in America. As if socialism is an evil term. Americans love labels."

"Go ahead Max. We know you well, and we admire you. You are a noble American. Answer Karen's concern," interjected Fausto.

"Thanks, Fausto. About my grandfather, the question was that his pet peeve was about religion, the existence of God, etc. I have the same issue as he had. I respect religions for they have like everybody else an investment in people's rights and people's well-being." Max paused, then inferred that his uncle Frederick could handle a good quarrel about the matter. Then stated, "he had the same DNA as my grandfather but with opposing views on society, different ways of living. My father, by temperament was docile. End of the talk! I loved

my grandfather as much as he loved me. Still, as I grew to see the world with a different pair of eyes, I politely disavowed my allegiance to his view. He was a good man. That is all I can say."

"I suspect you want to put an end to this conversation. But the thing of religion which you did not agree with him intrigues me. How did he display his displeasure? Why beat on religion?"

"I understand your question; we could spend the whole afternoon and night on this matter for I was close to him and heard his little sermons on the matter. For instance, and as it relates to the exploitation of human beings, especially, or the working-class in particular; adding value to the acquisition of wealth, I recall phrases like these: religion is a spiritual booze that causes submission; capitalism exploits human beings; or that humans are enslaved by capitalism and then take shelter in religion! In my book this is philosophy. But he was not altogether correct. Because I read of popes, in their encyclicals, lash out at these capitalistic pronouncements. I read them."

"Indeed, it is philosophy at its best. Unfortunately, the world moves on and the majority of people live on morsels from the tables." said Karen; then concluded, "Max you're so fair on your views. Thanks."

Max gave no clue he would add more to Karen's apparent conclusion. Karen recharged her beliefs -- "no wonder you folks are such enlightened people. I mean all of you. Look at your differences and how well you respect each other and each other's view. Amazing! I'd better start drinking out of your fountain of love, respect and intellectual cohesiveness ... Where are you, Vera?" Vera did not answer, she was out of their reach. "Certainly, I will insist that you include me in these matters involving such magnanimous people," concluded Karen.

"I agree with Karen. The more I learn about you -- from your friends -- the more I find myself on your team. Get me in, too," finished Katheryn.

"The meal is ready," said Elvera, who just showed up after consulting with Walter. "You can see we have two dining tables -- one large that can accommodate six and another -- that round one -- can accommodate four or more. By the grill area counter -- opposite the grill, we can seat four more. However, since we are not a big crowd, perhaps we can occupy the two tables."

Walter washed his hands in the sink, wiped them (under the disapproving look of Elvera) on his apron. Walter nicely waved her off. Then said: "Where is Sam?"

"In your meditation grounds -- your vegetable garden. I'll get him."

"You also have a vegetable garden, Vera?" asked Max.

"I do and I also enjoy it. Walt does all the work -- yard and the vegetable garden. I love my roses and flowers, and pick up the fruit from the trees." She stopped then resumed by saying *I forgot something; what was it?* Ah, it was about Walt's meditation refuge. I can vouch for him. While there, I would occasionally see him talking to himself. And, during summertime ... a couple coronas helped."

"It beats talking to her!" replied Walter. Elvera held her rebuttal back, preferring to gesture something else.

Max laughed and said: "So, you have a plot of land that grows vegetables. That is nice. Is the garden big?"

"Big enough to produce some vegetables year-round. It is almost two thirds of an acre. Go and see after we finish eating."

After Sam retreated from the meditation grounds, and guests chose their places, Elvera hinted for a prayer moment. "Shall we? Not a real prayer but a way to validate this nice gathering."

“Vera, if you’re thinking about us, we love prayers; they do good. Max may have already given you our view on this thing. We are living creatures -- prayers are logical.”

“Thanks, Katheryn. I suggest that our servant Fausto does the honors. Okay Fausto?” asked Elvera.

“Let’s gather and stand in a circle; hold hands and close our eyes. Think about this gathering, about what it has meant to you, about what the gifts of each other mean to each one of us, for we are pure gifts from heaven; think about how you can influence others to choose peace and love instead of rivalry and hate, of how you can be even more significant to others; how you can make a difference as in “Be-a-Difference-Rainbow.” They followed Fausto’s instructions, joined hands and stayed motionless for two minutes. Then Fausto said: “Creator of the world we live and know, send your spirit of creation to us in a more clear and obvious way, so as to validate that we were made in your image. We love what you did; help us to convince others to care more, love and give of themselves more.”

“Thank you, Father Mancini,” said Karen.

“You have a real way with words -- words that convince,” added Katheryn.

Clapping her hands, Elvera concluded: “Let’s eat and talk and be merry!”

The three ladies and Sam sat together at the table of four (or five if they dared to squeeze some space). Sam was happy he was sitting with Elvera. The others had the large patio dining table to themselves.



"Now I believe that your golf score is real. Your cooking or your grilling is superb. Invite me again," said Arthur with convincing joy.

"Can you invite us again?" asked Max. "I had heard before that you were a master at grilling..." Walter did not let Max finish.

"And you did not believe me?!" asked Walter. "Shame, Mr. Bingham!"

"Okay, I should be reprimanded. Try again and I will ask for a 'Michelin' rating. Deal?"

"Max, rating or no rating, you are welcome anytime. Even if you never convert!" exclaimed Walter.

"To what? A good grill-man? Actually, you can grill both ways: on the grill and now you are grilling me. You will succeed when you buy the best bottle of Rioja!" replied Max.

"This is a good start --- a duet of smarts!" entered Herbert on the game of words. "It sounds like Spanish wine, this thing of Rioja. Is that it, Walt?"

"I like Rioja wine. However, being Basque is one thing; being from French Basque is another."

"No kidding, Walt. Two different things!?"

"Yes, my dear Herbert. Still, all wine is good. California leads the way. Let's enjoy the meal as there is lots of food, and the afternoon is so young. I even bet we have ample room to nap or sleep if some of you do not pass the sobriety test." Finished Walter.

"Good idea; can we talk about Sam and Randolph? It is so precious that Sam is here with us. He got attached to Vera," said Arthur.

"This is a miracle, Art!" said Herbert. "Don't you think so, Fausto?"

"I do. Perhaps this is a turning point for Sam. Could this be tied up to Randolph? Could this be a message for him to also take a look

at himself? Could this be a message from God that he cannot carry the world or the world's misery by himself. Or, is it the smarts of these many years of helping others, and teaching others to help others and themselves finally banging at his own door? Or, is the good he does boomeranging on him?" Fausto paused, looked at his interlocutors, and finding nothing but awe, continued ... "It sounds like that I am preaching or found my way to let what I am enjoying this afternoon spill over now. Thanks Walt. Pulling your leg, saying funny things at your grilling talent is one thing. But I will repeat this one thing – the barbeque is awesome," stated Fausto with pleasure.

"Believe me, I was not nervous you guys were coming. I love doing barbeques, and everyone who can do some cooking will not screw up the grilling. I am pleased you are enjoying yourselves. As for me, I am happy listening to your moments of inspiration. Better than some Sunday sermons I hear at times." Father Mancini smiled and looked at the others for consensus. Walter finished his monologue. "Sorry, Fausto. Priests or homilists cannot be at their best all the time. Anyway, tell us some more about Sam."

Max asked a question instead: "Then, Randolph is gone and this may be affecting Sam?!"

"Yes, I think this and perhaps many other events are impacting Sam. Randolph has not gone away yet. He was supposed to go this past week. However, there were other things that delayed them. I even went with Randolph and Randolph's girlfriend to Saint Vincent de Paul in San Francisco to buy things for them, courtesy of the Conference's generous voucher. We bought some additional clothes and two small carry-on bags. The buying caused Sally to get a larger piece of luggage, too. Both are leaving this Tuesday via the old Greyhound bus way. Do you remember the old commercial -- *Go Greyhound and leave the driving to us.!??*" They did remember.

The others smiled broadly and Fausto continued. "Sam is over sixty; he has been doing this business of homelessness and helping homeless folks for over two decades; I think before I even came to San Francisco. Like in any of us, things get old, things get to you, you get frustrated like Mother Teresa may have found moments of stress, of no ending poverty, and then something else, like God saying you need help, you need rest and ... boom! It strikes on your head. I pray that all of this is causing him to process changes in him and his environment. Now, Vera the link. She is a woman ... and bang ... he softens up. Take a look without looking. Can you see how comfortable he is with them? Vera, the link!"

"I don't have my own take, because this is the first time that I am involved with you folks. It sounds like a lot has gone in this man's life and life itself is finding him now. The cycles, I guess." Arthur intervened and the others nodded. "So, the way I've quickly learned is that Randolph helped Sam in helping the other homeless. And, Randolph by moving away is causing changes -- emotional and behavior changes -- in Sam. Can these be life or direction changes in Sam? Can he survive or, like Randolph, cause him to find another venue, another route in his life?"

Herbert tried to answer but then deferred to Fausto. "Well, before I mention Herb's influence in Sam, let me add something that I believe through experience. Just as in real life, when genuine good Samaritans do favors to people, it is like they innocently or in innocuous ways also own a piece of those helped. Sam, by being around us so often, naturally surrenders to realities, softens his way of being active, slowly reveals his ever-concealed emotions. Herb has come to know Sam by virtue of his church sponsoring a shelter; and also, by learning more first hand. Sam acknowledges this; Sam kind of finds that we two, in our own responsibilities as clergymen, are real --

we love what we do. He is finding that loving what he does also has shortcomings, barriers, bad days. It is life being what it is. I don't mind going to the streets to help Sam solve a case. For instance, Herbert helps him in other ways. When they meet at the shelter, he sees Herb naturally adding value."

The others looked at Herbert. While Fausto hesitated, Herbert continued deferring the narrative to him. "What I guess I am seeing now, is that things change, even if the needs for his help do not. He is using his smarts to accomplish perhaps the same things as before. But street needs keep growing, like never ending. Then, his experiences, he tells me, reveal that not all homeless people are the same, not all have the same needs, or agree to be helped in a logical way. Remember, the homeless world is similar to your and my world -- give or take an inch. It is so vast or so identical, for humans are humans. I don't think I answered your question, Art. Sorry."

"You did, because this is a world that passes by us; other than the news we read. We know very little about it. It is like their world does not exist if parallel with our society."

"Art you said something I meant to include in my homily. I said if needed I would be on the street with Sam for some rescue. I would and I will. Still, after that, I will be able to come to my own bed and have a cup of tea. Like returning to my comfort zone -- some qualified comfort, but comfort."

"Outstanding narrative, Fausto. Now, on Sam but on a trivial note. Do you still act as Sam's bank, holding his money?" asked Max.

"Oh, no. Actually, it happened only for a short period of time. I got a checking account for him free of monthly charges. I saw an ad in the paper that one regional bank was offering checking accounts with no service charges for life and got one for him. He is disciplined with the management of ins and outs and consults me. And, about the

deal of safe keeping his money, I told him that in spite of the Catholic Church being so friendly, one had to avoid appearances of impropriety. He understood it. And another thing -- Sam also makes money besides the small benefits from the City. His side jobs are indicative of the respect he gets from downtown people."

"Such as what?" asked Arthur.

"Such as a downtown courier -- carrying packages from one firm to another. There are a ton of small legal firms, small investment advisors and other niches. The Internet even with emails and faxes are not enough. That is sweet money on the side. His work in downtown San Francisco is faster than UPS."

"I get it. So, what is next after Randolph is gone?" asked Walter.

"Sam is making good use of the shelter, as a day overseer? Isn't that it, Herb?" Herb nodded. "He still visits the streets; finds homeless people he can convert to good habits -- like from drugs. Drug users are tough to handle because the users lie all the time. But he helps transient homeless and directs them to move on to the outer areas in the Bay Area or comforts them with words. He will find someone to fill Randolph's void. He will. Yet difficult, for Randolph, who is twenty years younger than him, was a real find. Three years with Sam, both would clean dozens of people a year; they were that good. Sam will find a replacement; it will take time. He is patient now."

"Let's stretch our legs. I am going to see your vegetable garden," claimed Max.

"Go, get some green beans and fava beans. They are about ready. Vera will get you a bag." Walter replied.



Meanwhile the ladies were having a ball with Sam. "Your friend Randolph is leaving you. You will miss him." Said Karen.

"I will. But he is doing the right thing; he has helped many people."

"He is much younger than you; however, I thought he was hooked on you," stated Elvera.

Sam added, "that is true and also the reason he needed to find new places. He needed to live his other journey in life. It worked so well. I will always remember him and wish him the best. I am certain he will achieve the best for himself."

"Where is he going?" prompted Katheryn.

"Somewhere around Houston. His girlfriend is returning home. Let me think -- not really, but close to where her parents live. Her brother had insisted in telling her that her parents forgave her and were willing to take her back. She'll go back but not to live with them."

"Long story. And Randolph is in the loop!" ventured Karen.

"Good read. You are smart. Being a writer, you can decipher the game."

Karen smiled, nodded a "thank you" and hoped Sam would continue. He did: "Randolph was like a son to me. He got himself out of drugs and together we did get as many people as we could free of the drug evil. Sally, his girlfriend, was one of them who got out of drugs. Then, she became like him -- two peas in a pod. They would listen to the homeless stories -- I mean young homeless in drugs -- play the game with them and then apply the realities of life." Sam was interrupted by Karen with a question ... as what life. Sam replied ... "realities of life means that is the way it should happen -- live a decent life. People need help, need to see the light. And, they also believe people can turn their lives around."

"So, you and Randolph, and ... Sally were the light," added Katheryn.

"Many of us are that light."

"Then, Randolph and Sally worked in pairs, right?" Karen continued as if ready to collect information for her essay or book. Instead, she braved a question that had lingered in her mind. "Pardon me, Sam. You speak so well, as if you had a good education."

Sam blushed and thanked Karen. "Not much more than high school." He paused and found his better answer. "You see, when I got clean and changed my ways, I started reading the papers daily, you see, discarded papers. Then I came to spend some time in the library. It helped. Father Mancini noticed some changes in my conversation and encouraged me to stay informed and to read when I could." He paused while Karen processed the explanation -- in awe. Sam continued: "It is not a big deal."

"Sorry, Sam, it is a big deal. To me it is. Do you have a cell phone?"

"I do. Under Obama's rules we got cell phones for free. You know, discarded phones. And, we could get service almost for free through the libraries. However, I do not make that much use of it. It could become a vice."

"Thanks, Sam, and sorry for interrupting your story. Go on, if you remember," finished Karen.

Sam smiled and relieved of more questions; actually, he was anxious to finish his stories. "I know you are a writer and that is fine. Let me tell you a couple more stories. When I came to know Sally, Randolph was experienced with girls. He was always with girls or girls would tag along with him. That made me think he was directing them to night clubs, not as a pimp; I swear. It is that he has some charm -- homeless charm, if you understand what I mean. All for the good,

because he would bring them where I was and then we would work on their weaknesses. Most of it was about family, family problems, generation problems and conflicts. Then, we would give them a choice -- live like us, without responsibilities of paying rent, bills, job obligations and sleeping under the stars, in the rain. Drugs lead to trouble, and they knew the repercussions. Once they listened to us and we suggested changes, they started finding good alternatives. When we thought they were ready, we shipped them back to where they had come from. Many times, Randolph and I got them cleaned up, dressed them with good used clothes and gave them some money for a three-day bus trip. Father Mancini helped us with clothes and whatever."

Sam stopped as the three ladies just listened with keen attention. "I am happy for Sally and Randolph. Her brother says she has a job waiting for her. Sally has pop – she can wait on tables, do bartender work, or anything. She needs a break and motivation, a purpose." The ladies were still in listening mode; Sam thought of finishing the narrative. "Randolph will be working on a small farm and having the use of a modest house for free. Randolph and Sally can make it; they will make it."

"How about you?" Braved Elvera, finally.

"I will make it, too. I am here. I understand now that you are my friends, and also feel destined to do what I am doing in a smarter way. I am happy. I will find other Randolphs and Sallys."

Tears were slowly dropping on their cheeks. Sam said he was going to the bathroom.

About the Author



John Carlos de Melo was born in São Miguel, Azores, Portugal in 1941. At age twenty-five, after marrying his high-school sweetheart, he came to America and settled in the San Francisco Bay Area, where he has lived since September, 1966.

After a thirty-four year banking career and then twelve years as a management consultant of small business enterprises, John found joy in writing projects.

Among few short and long articles in two mixed language (Portuguese and English) publications in California and Newark, NJ, he published two books and collaborated on another.

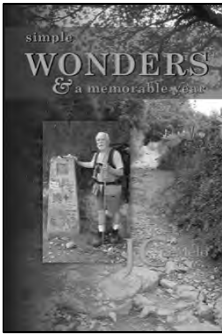
The first – *Simple Wonders* -- a book of memoirs and a narrative of John's year of 2011, became his first test. Satisfied with the result, he veered to fiction where he found his element in *Chasing the Dream*. Indeed, this work is more than an intriguing fictional novel for it embodies the dreams, the drama, the trials and triumphs of human beings searching for a better place for them and for those they came to love.

Married for over fifty-four years, father of three sons and grandfather of seven grandchildren, John values more than ever the importance

of faith, family and human relationships. Totally integrated in America from the moment he arrived, he still maintains ties with friends he left in his birthplace.



The Author's Works:



***Simple Wonders
and
a Wonderful Year*** –
published 2012



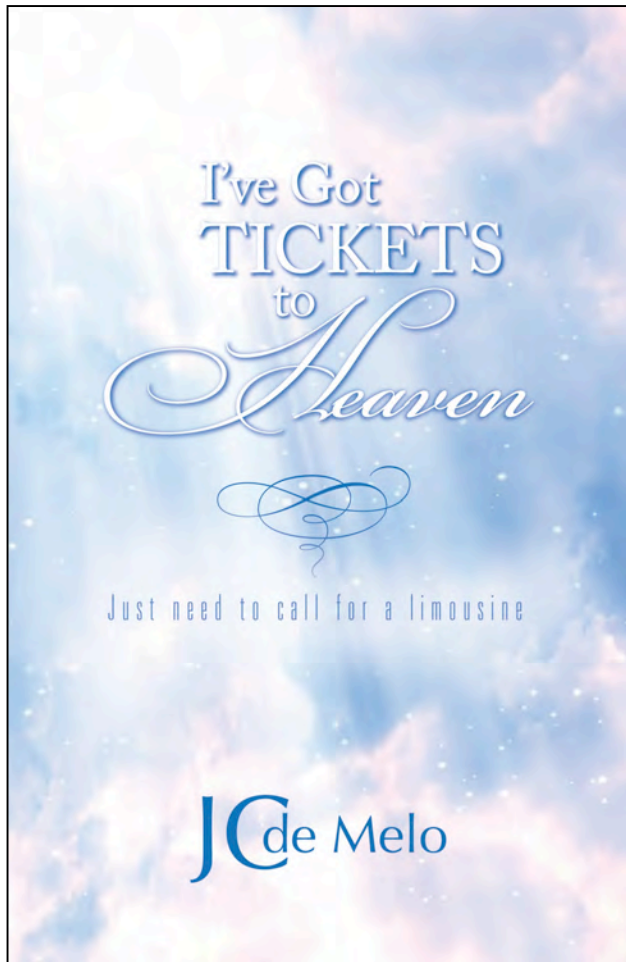
Chasing the Dream
(An American
Emigrant's Elusive
Romance) –
published 2014



Untamed Dreams
(A collaborative
work) – published
2016



***À Procura da
Diáspora*** (In
Portuguese. A replica
of Chasing the Dream)
– published 2019



The reader is warmly introduced to I Have Got Tickets to Heaven by the Disclaimer page revealing fiction as the book category. Yet, once one dares to navigate the whole collage of linking stories, the reader will arrive at the conclusion that there is more than fiction. The writer's longevity may reveal author's own experiences at play.

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