

CHAPTER 22--VISION

“Live free or die,” Amanda mumbled again.

“Sorry?”

“Oh, nothing.”

The revelation was still burning brightly in Amanda’s head. Freedom – movement – travel. Amanda was feeling alive for the first time in a long time, and it was all because of her bold step to embark on this adventure. “Are there any other examples you can tell me about?”

“What examples?” Lars asked, somewhat confused.

“Examples of animals like the bluefin, animals that like to travel.”

The list was long. Of course, there was the polar bear that Amanda already knew about. There was the famous wildebeest of Kenya and Tanzania’s Serengeti plains. There were bird migrations, and there were many creatures in the sea. Then there were the nearly forgotten ones who had been wiped out or nearly so by the hands of man. Passenger pigeons who once numbered in the billions. They flew in flocks up to 200 miles long, but hunting competitions and

land clearing eventually led the bird to extinction in the early 1900s. Perhaps the most famous one of all was the over-hunting of the bison, or buffalo as some might call. From a population that was once in the tens of millions, it was reduced down to less than a 1,000 by the mid to late 1800s before any sort of efforts were taken at revival.

His final example was an obscure one, the pronghorn antelope. While it was second only to the cheetah in top speed of sixty miles per hour, compared to the Cheetah's top speed of seventy miles per hour, it held the title of fastest distance runner on Earth. The pronghorn would easily beat the best human marathoners. A top marathon runner with a twenty mile head start, would still lose. A cheetah would stop running after thirty seconds.

He noted that some groups of pronghorns still migrated, the longest route was of a small group of a couple hundred in Wyoming that went from Yellowstone to a town several hundred miles south. Their migration route was under siege due to home and natural gas development. He allayed Amanda's concerns about extinction, they now numbered over one million from a low of perhaps 20,000, but there was a more interesting thing to learn from the pronghorn.

"I like the pronghorn – cheetah comparison."

"Why is that?"

"Because it pretty much tells the story about our view of the world. We would rather use up the resources of the world in a short period of time, just as a cheetah would use up all its muscle energy for a kill, rather than pacing ourselves like a pronghorn."

Stoically looking on, perhaps it was appropriate that Amanda had never heard of the fast, and not quite as sexy, pronghorn antelope, but that she had most definitely heard of the sexy

cheetah.

The one theme that kept occurring to Amanda was that the pursuit and chase of prey or better hunting grounds was biological, like in romance or business. To travel was instinctual. How did she come to live a largely sedentary life?

She had known Lars several days now and was just starting to crack his mind for even deeper insights. She wondered how he managed out here by himself. “Do you ever get lonely?”

“I used to a very long time ago. Once I learned to connect and respect the spirit of life all around us, I never got lonely anymore. The creatures all around us – whether they be in the ocean, on the land, or in the air. The trees and plants that grow from the earth. The whistle of the wind, the whip of the water. Sometimes, even the fire of destruction. It exudes a sense of balance, a sense of harmony. Does this mean I don’t ever miss my wife or child, of course not, but if you mean in the very deep sense of the word loneliness – no.”

Amanda tried to imagine the world as Lars saw it. What did he know that she didn’t? “Do you think the polar bear will become extinct in the wild?”

“I already told you what I know, that is a decision, people like you will have to determine.”

“What do you mean?”

“To decide what you want to fight for.”

Amanda solemnly listened to Lars’ opinion, hoping for a reassuring – yes, the polar bear will never go extinct - even if it was a lie. Why did it even matter she wondered. After all, she had lived her whole life without ever seeing a polar bear in the wild. Maybe it was just the idea

that some creature, a powerful and stately one, still lived freely out in this vast Arctic. Maybe it was just because they were cute, but that would be a strictly human concern, no more, no less.

Lars was about to give her some answers.

He started again, “Each animal is connected to us in ways we don’t fully understand. Disturbing the balance causes other problems.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nature can be unpredictable and nothing is certain, but less polar bears would probably lead to more seals. More seals would lead to a decrease in herring populations, a prime fishing target. Arctic fox numbers would be reduced, as they scavenge the kills of polar bears.” He continued on, explaining an entire chain reaction of events playing themselves out over time. The problem being, we didn’t know where and when the reaction ended, if it ever did. “The Inuit have a name for this unpredictability, *uggianaqtuq*, to behave unexpectedly.”

“Uggianaqtuq,” she repeated.

“Perhaps some more examples would be insightful.”

They continued to talk about how the decimation of top predators could have a cascade effect on an entire ecosystem. The over-hunting of wolves in Yellowstone, led to elk overgrazing, which caused a decline in aspen trees and riverside willows. The decline of the aspens led to less songbirds and colorful landscapes. The decline of the willows led to less beavers, migratory birds, and more riverbank erosion.

“So, if the polar bear disappeared, all sorts of things that we couldn’t predict might happen?”

“Yes.” Shifting the focus to the oceans, Lars explained how the over-hunting of sheephead and lobsters off California led to an explosion in purple sea urchins, urchins which ate all the kelp, only to disappear themselves when the entire kelp forest had been eaten away. Or how the decimation of sharks and tuna would cause an increase in mackerel populations, which would eventually cause phytoplankton to be decimated. Phytoplankton, being one of the basic ingredients in aquatic life, and the life on which all others species depended on indirectly, the power of the small.

It would be a much lonelier and more colorless world Amanda realized.

They talked about food webs and how life was more complicated than a circle, but rather like the web of a spider. A misunderstanding in how things related would have disastrous, perhaps irreversible consequences. Amanda soon realized it could be applied to her own life. It was important to have a good network of friends, not just one ‘best’ friend, as if something happened to this friend, death or fall-out, then it would cause indescribable grief. Perhaps that is what older cultures knew well by having extended families. While the death of a parent would hurt, the blow would be cushioned by the extended family web. It was like the way many animals lived in packs perhaps. It was even like having a balanced and multi-faceted economy, not overly dependent on one or two products and services.

It could also be applied to another aspect of her own life she realized – to not base so much of her happiness on work and material accumulation. In simpler terms she realized – one should create a web of happiness.

“Uncertainty,” Amanda mumbled.

“There are many more tales that could be told, such as the over-hunting of snakes leading to a rat infestations, or my favorite – invasive species.”

“Invasive species?”

“Non-native animals introduced into an environment.”

He shared with Amanda the story of the cane toad in Australia and how it was brought in to protect against a beetle pest of sugar plantations, only to become a pest itself. Then, how even unintended actions had lead to dramatic unintended consequences. The accidental introduction of a lethal brown tree snake, probably a stowaway on a boat from the area around Papua New Guinea, led to the disappearance and extinction of birds, lizards, and butterflies on Guam. This all happened in only thirty years.

“The music of nature that people enjoyed there has been wiped out. It is like a loss of freedom to enjoy the sound of birds. In Hawaii, it is just the reverse.”

“Hawaii?” Guam, Papua New Guinea, they both felt a million miles away, but Hawaii, there was always someone talking about Hawaii at work.

“I thought that might get your attention.”

“Tell me.”

“An infestation by the coqui frog, originally from Puerto Rico, is becoming a big problem in Hawaii. It is thought they arrived in the 1990s, by potted plant, from either Puerto Rico or Florida. It hasn't been very long. Back in Puerto Rico, natives like the frog, but that is because it has natural predators which control its numbers. With no natural predators around in Hawaii, numbers have reached up to 10,000 frogs per acre, more than five times the concentration in

Puerto Rico.”

“That’s a lot of frogs. How is it a problem?”

“Frogs eat a lot of insects. They might eat the insects that Hawaiian native birds rely on. The increased number of frogs might also increase the levels of rats and mongoose, which will also affect birds.”

“It’s like a chain reaction.”

“It gets more interesting. These frogs are noisy. The noise level in some places has been measured at eighty to ninety decibels, comparable to a lawnmower. It has even affected real estate prices.”

“Why are they so noisy?”

“It is the males trying to attract females.”

“That makes a lot of sense!”

“The noise they make is higher in Hawaii than Puerto Rico because of their higher concentrations.”

“Are they on all the islands?”

“Mostly on Maui and the Big Island I think. Last I heard they were invading Oahu. I heard it was a minimum fine of \$50,000 to transport or keep them, up to \$200,000 and three years in prison.”

“That is bad.”

“They call it the two inch shrieking nightmare.”

“Why can’t they stop it?”

“It’s hard to catch. It’s not much bigger than a quarter. It spends a lot of time in trees, hatches as a frog, not a tadpole, and it reproduces faster in Hawaii.”

“It sounds like a tiny virus that can make you sick.”

“There’s another way of looking at it too.”

“Two sides to every coin,” she chimed.

“Nature might find its own balance. Maybe the frogs will help eat the many non-native mosquitoes. Maybe the birds will start eating the frogs and everything will be all right. Then again, maybe not. This takes time, a concept that man often doesn’t want to give.”

“I thought I read something about mosquitoes on Hawaii. There weren’t any until the mid 1800s. That must have been paradise, so many changes.”

“Many changes happen in our lifetime, sometimes not even half a lifetime in the world we know.”

“Like the coqui frog.”

“Even when most people don’t pay attention.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Amanda realized more and more, mindful of the polar bear’s plight.

Their conversation inevitably returned to extinction and the recognition that we collectively, all of us, unique species, whether human or animal, represented the miracle of life, freedom, and harmony.

Harmony. It jogged Amanda’s memory about what the lady at the zoo had said about the deer in Japan. Confrontation versus harmony. She thought about the chain reaction of events in

the animals they talked about. Lars had talked about unpredictability.

She thought about all the conversations of global warming she had been having. It didn't seem such a stretch anymore to connect Stephanie's accident with it now. It made Amanda sad. It made her mad, and ashamed, at her own ignorance and at a world that increasingly seemed out of control.

Most of her life she had been battling her own demons, that was her excuse. Maybe the answer lay in taking care and understanding the nature around you, and it would take care of you.

She pushed her emotions away to wonder what else could be attributed to upsetting the natural order of things. There were the recent news headlines: forest fires, hurricanes, flooding, heat waves, droughts, all naturally occurring, but how many of these recent episodes were caused by an imbalance and lack of harmony by mankind toward its mother host? One thing was for sure, no one would be the wiser if they didn't listen to the subtle, and not so subtle signals.

Lars sat silently as Amanda's brain churned away.

They were all temper tantrums from nature perhaps. When we forced our ways on mother earth, she reacted, sometimes badly. Would we then have to spend more and more effort to re-adapt? There would be many victims along the way. How did this affect people?

Might it reduce our freedom gradually? Polluted air affecting our sinuses, or a gradual increase in the average yearly heat. Or it might lash out and affect our lives significantly. Bigger hurricanes, major flooding, or a vicious rainstorm that could take away ones she loved, Stephanie. What would people say was the cause? Vagaries of uncontrollable nature or at their

own hands?

She continued thinking, not wanting to dwell too long on Stephanie's accident. How else would an out of harmony world affect us? Heat waves came to mind. People would stay inside more and use air conditioning, prisoners of the indoors. This was a loss of freedom to go outside, smell fresh air, and exercise. Maybe this was a major reason why people went to health clubs more often.

It occurred to her that if a city was infested with fast moving cars everywhere, people wouldn't bicycle or walk like she had in Copenhagen. The outside world had been made unpleasant, and dangerous, never mind the pollution. Kids couldn't walk to school so they would have to be taken by their parents, no wonder so many of her co-workers complained of being chauffeurs. These same kids wouldn't mature as quickly as they were dependent on their parents more. These kids and adults would gain more weight too.

Sprawling neighborhoods meant that untouched nature was pushed farther and farther away. Enjoyment of nature became less and less frequent until it became just a faded memory. Wasn't all this technology supposed to make life better?

For every new freedom that the endless constructions of man provided, they eroded many more. It didn't have to be this way, she knew this much now.

Perhaps the key to create harmony was to slow down, and think in more dimensions. Instead of looking at the whole picture, we, some anyway, had gotten stuck looking at a singular cost and benefit. We had overspecialized, that is what a 'modern' society meant. Every worker bee diligently performing in their field of expertise. Few could see the big picture. It was

certainly not a holistic view. She was guilty of this when she marketed the benefits of a new product or service to the extreme. Downsides? Never. The world needed a new renaissance!

She was amazed at how her vision of the world was changing. This experience was an expansion of her vision allowing her to see things she had never seen before. Decidedly, many were suffering a syndrome of narrowing vision. That seemed obvious, once you saw the truth of the matter.