

CHAPTER 24--MIND / NO MIND

They settled back inside from scouting outside, it was a false alarm. If there was a polar bear, it had disappeared. The excitement gave a shot of adrenaline to Amanda who had been showing signs of sleepiness. She was also feeling a bit flustered and frustrated.

“You look like you are in despair.”

“How can you tell?”

“Your face betrays your feelings.”

“It’s that obvious?”

“A famous Danish philosopher once said there are two kinds of despair – one of no possibilities, and the other of infinite possibilities.”

“I’ll believe that. At the beginning I thought we would have plenty of time to see a bear, now time is ticking. I’m still glad to be here, but I must admit I would be a little disappointed if we didn’t get a good sighting and encounter.”

“I have failed you.”

“No, you’ve been wonderful. You don’t tell polar bears where to go.”

“We will have to trust another.”

“The Inuit hunters?”

“Yes, tomorrow we will head to Savissivik. They live here year round and know the terrain much better than I.”

“You are very well qualified. You saved us from getting stranded on the ice!”

Lars blinked his eyes in gratitude, but remained silent otherwise to her praise.

“What is your life philosophy Lars?”

“My philosophy? It’s not that important.”

“I would like to hear it.”

“It is quite simple. The trick is to not think too much.”

“To not think too much?”

“About yourself.”

“Myself?”

“You might also call it pride.”

“Pride?”

“It is especially true here in the Arctic. If you become overconfident of your abilities out here, you will not last long. This is a very unforgiving place.”

“I can believe that.”

“This is my philosophy, not just for here, but for wherever I am.”

“What’s wrong with pride? I’m not proud of everything I’ve done, but I still feel like I’ve

accomplished something with my life.”

“I don’t think we need our pride at all. Pride makes us fall in love with ourselves and the trappings we’re surrounded by. Then we forget our friends and our true selves.”

The forgetting of her friends rang true. But she had trouble with the other part. “Our true self?”

“Pride causes a long list of problems.”

“Like what?”

“I can’t say it is the same for every person, but here are some symptoms.”

His list included the hardening of the mind, which led to stubbornness and inflexibility to change. This reflected an overall inability to admit we were wrong. It was the reason for the saying, you can’t teach an old dog new tricks. There was the stopping of our natural curiosity because we thought we knew it all. Pride made us feel smart. Even if we thought we were only smart in a few areas, that same feeling of smartness could be transferred to other areas in the mind. It was the feeling of intelligence that moved around in the mind, not the subject matter itself.

Perhaps even worse were the negative emotions that pride caused. It made us more demanding and needy, which made us fall into addictive behaviors easier. It made us angry easier. It turned hope into worry and made us paranoid and fearful. It’s most damaging effect was a culmination of these others, in the form of self-destructive behaviors, as pride did not want us to forgive others, and most importantly, forgive ourselves.

Amanda realized that she was guilty of many of these. “If we don’t have pride, what will

we have?”

“We will have self-respect and our instincts. That is all we need.”

“Self-respect, ok. But instincts? I never trust my instincts.”

“Why not?”

“Because they are usually wrong.”

“How do you know that what you felt wasn’t just other feelings and not your true instincts?”

She was stumped on this question.

“Let me explain what I believe instinct to be. Have you ever said something like – my brain hurts, I’m tired of thinking.”

Amanda didn’t even need to answer, she nodded in the affirmative.

“I feel that to be joyful we must live more by instinct, not our overly logically conscious mind. Too much logic gets in the way of true joy in life. Thinking takes more energy than instinct, which is nearly effortless.”

“Joy? Effortless instinct?”

“The more we can forget about ourselves, the happier we will be. I once read a quote that said the mark of an advanced society was one which required the least amount of effort to be joyful.”

“Least amount of effort?”

She reminisced about her short day in Copenhagen.

“As for joy, it isn’t happiness. Being happy is just a momentary feeling that too often

goes away quickly. Joy is a state of being. If you have to think about being joyful, then you aren't in a state of joy."

"A state of joy?" She wasn't sure about the last time she felt such a feeling.

"When was the last time you forgot about yourself?"

"I don't know."

"How about when you were listening to breaking waves or admiring a beautiful sunset? Or listening to beautiful music? Or when you gazed into a lover's eyes or gazed at a beautiful painting? If you are too prideful and self-conscious, you may not be able to get in to these moments."

Naturally, she had a business example. "Could it be like a session of brainstorming where everyone is coming up with ideas?"

"Yes, perhaps. When you think too much about what is right and what is wrong then the ideas stop flowing."

Another example occurred to Amanda, but she decided to keep it to herself. The example in her mind was during moments of intense sex, she would say 'I love you' in a glorious moment, even if she didn't mean it, but it ended after orgasm, coincidentally, when she started to think too much again. Maybe relying more on instinct would lead to more love in the world.

Lars explained the power of instinct.

The example being like an athlete in the zone. It was like a basketball player scoring points at will under pressure, like Michael Jordan in a playoff game, or any other athlete or performer at the top of their game doing incredible physical feats. They didn't think, they just

reacted by instinct. This was a learned instinct.

There was also the learned instinct that we had to survive in the our particular societies. But many societies were built on a foundation of pride. Thus requiring our brains to use more logic rather than our true innate instinct. There were fewer and fewer outlets for our innate instinct in the ordered worlds that had been created. Even many of our games had too many rules. The number of lawyers was perhaps the best indication. The more we built societies that dulled our innate instincts over the long term, the more disastrous events would eventually occur.

As Lars explained, it was like when a wine bottle was uncorked or the carbonation from a can of pop shaken too many times. The shake was all the rules and logic that everyday people were subjected to, due to a society that has been built on too much logic and pride, rather than innate instinct.

“How do I understand my innate instincts better?”

“You must lose your pride. The more you lose, the more you and others around you benefit.”

“How?”

“There are a few statements you train your mind to believe.”

“A few statements?”

He shared them with Amanda. “You shall not think you are special. You shall not think you are smart. You shall not think you are important. You shall not think you can teach someone. You shall not think that anyone cares about you.”

“Whoa. Those don’t sound right.”

“I think many people may find them a bit contrary to how they have been raised. There are a few others. A variation of these form the foundation of Danish thinking. I myself cannot imagine not believing in them.”

“There must be something to them then.”

“I have seen it many times out here. People come here with a bigger sense of themselves. Then they are humbled by this place. I think you might call it pride before the fall. A good fall.”

“Fall?”

“To become something different, you must smash the image of what you were before. Don’t try to believe in them immediately. Just think about them for a little while. Someday when you leave this place, perhaps you will know.”

They still sounded like belittling statements, if not odd. They seemed contrary to the very ideas she had grown up with, that she was unique, she was an individualist, she was special, she was going places.

“That’s it?”

“Yes.”

She excused herself and ventured outside to admire the Northern Lights again. As she breathed in the cool air she thought more about why she would want to believe in such statements. A few answers came quickly.

If she thought she was special growing up, then that would explain why she craved attention. Maybe that is what made her so competitive, too much. Maybe that is what made her

lie to Stephanie. That tenacious drive to be better. Maybe this desire to be better made her feel more jealous.

Her jealous feelings made her idealize Stephanie's life too. It made her a victim of the grass is greener on the other side mentality. With Jack's admission, clearly their married life was not as ideal as she thought it was. Perhaps if she wasn't so jealous about the grass on the other side, she would make a better effort at making her own grass green.

And if jealousy made her lie to Stephanie, she must have been lying to herself. Nathan told her that much. If she couldn't be honest with her best friend, how could she be honest to herself. She was feeling better now, but that was because she was taking care of what she truly wanted, not what she logically thought she should do.

Perhaps she always assumed that her parents and friends were supposed to love and care about her because she was special. This led her to demand that she be treated a certain way, even if the other person was incapable of that. No wonder she didn't get along with her father or mother. She turned them away because of the past. She was too proud to ever forgive her parents because she never got her idealized childhood. Did anyone get an ideal childhood? Or was that just a marketing invention? Maybe an assumption to believe that anyone cared about you setup false expectations. We would take relationships for granted too. No wonder she had problems in dating.

At work too, the sense that other people should care about how she felt only set the stage for more combativeness later as people were afraid to get their ideas shot down.

Maybe feeling too smart made her less open to some other people's ideas. Maybe she was

too smart for her own good. For if she was so smart, why had she been so unhappy?

She'd always hated cold weather, but this cool air was clearing her mind. Clearing her spirit. Cold weather was good. She retreated back into the warm tent.

“How was the show?”

“I barely noticed it. I was too busy thinking about what you said.”

“And what conclusion did you come to?”

“I can see why one should believe them.”

“Perhaps it might help to hear the other version of them.”

“The other version?”

“They affirm your own individuality and help you deal with other people and messages, perhaps even more than you realize today.”

She listened to Lars again.

“I shall not think you are special. I shall not think you are smart. I shall not think you are important. I shall not think you can teach me anything. I shall not think you care about me.”

“They're basically the same phrases but directed at someone else?”

“Yes. I think you have a metaphor in America about fishing. Instead of giving someone fish. . .”

“You should teach them how to fish,” Amanda finished his sentence.

“Except these phrases instill the spirit in you to teach yourself how to fish. They also protect your mind from manipulation by others. They also give control of your self-esteem, back to you and not others.”

It started to make a little more sense to her.

As Lars explained it, the first set one used for themselves and the second set was directed at other people – friends, parents, or even advertising actors. They could help someone maintain their sense of self and identity amongst a sea of conflicting messages. “I call it mind / no mind.”

“No mind?”

“The idea is just to BE. That is joy.”

“To be?”

“Yes. A traveler who I once told the story to had a clever description. He said we shouldn’t BE-lieve, because leaves fall to the ground. We should just BE.”

“Interesting.”

“A balance of thinking and instinct.”

Amanda listened to Lars’ speculation about a related common physical manifestation. The manifestation was Alzheimer’s Disease. By its very definition, the disease was a forgetting of the sense of self. Our body wanted to return to a more instinctive, almost animal like state. For the decline in memory and language skills could be paralleled with the way animals thought, with mostly instinct, not logic. Animals didn’t hold feelings of hate like we did and had limited vocabulary. More importantly, animals didn’t get Alzheimer’s, only humans.

The thinking was that those who had bigger egos, more pride, were more prone to suffer from Alzheimer’s. It wasn’t about popularity, strictly how one thought of themselves. It might be described as brain trauma from thinking too much about yourself.

The disease was more severe in the most proud and egotistical people. Country level

statistics on incidence of Alzheimer's and dementia were hinting at this. A precursor to Alzheimer's was that the bigger the ego, the higher the incidence of mental disorders. Disorders that required artificial stimulants, illegal or not, like Prozac, or cocaine. The point was made that perhaps people could learn from Special Olympics athletes and how they smiled so often. They were handicapped, but often smiling.

He clarified that while many thought Alzheimer's was terrible, one only needed to reconsider it from the perspective of the "patient." All the expert opinions said, it wasn't the person who suffered after awhile, it was only from the perspective of the caregiver.

After all, if a patient forgot their sense of self and who they were, why would they care?

As for loss of motor skills to eat, eventually they would forget to eat and just pass away, it was only us who selfishly wanted to keep them alive for longer than necessary

"I can think of a few people with egos too large." She thought of her boss and a few of her co-workers. "Maybe that's why they call it happy hour."

"Huh?"

"Happy hour you know, after work at a bar, because we think too much."

"Ah, yes. I remember that 'happy hour' as you call it in America. Maybe that helps explain why, we Danish are among the top beer drinkers in the world."

"Beer, the social lubricant."

"Indeed."

"You seem to know a lot about life," Amanda mused.

"I'm only a wildlife biologist, I travel, and read magazines about nature, that is the little

extent of what I do know.”

“No, no, I mean, life in general.”

“You are too kind.”

“You are too modest.”

“Being out here in the wilderness alone gives me a lot of time to think and read. I meet a lot of different people and I end up just listening to a lot of stories. It is easy to get rushed in our modern life and not listen.”

“I wish I had the time,” Amanda reflected. Overjoyed by this sharing of ideas and stories, she was distraught at the inevitable return to her existing life which was starting to creep into her mind again as the days ticked away.

Lars scratched his head. “I have traveled several times to California, Florida, and Texas for research, conferences, and vacation. There is something I never understood about America while I was there. When I was there, we biologists, naturally, would talk about differences between our cultures. I was surprised when other researchers told me about the average vacation allowance and workweek in America. I think they said it was about ten days vacation plus holidays every year, maybe twenty days, and even that wasn’t guaranteed.”

“How many do you get in Denmark?”

“We get thirty days.”

“Thirty days? You mean vacation plus holidays total?”

“No, I mean thirty days plus holidays. Forty days total”

“That’s six weeks off plus two weeks holiday! Are you joking? How long do you have to

work in the same place?”

“We start accruing at that rate in the first year.”

“You don’t even have to wait six months or anything like that?”

“No.”

“Our average workweek is capped at about thirty seven hours per week. Many of my friends in America worked significantly longer.”

Amanda was in disbelief. She had been led to believe that her land was the promised land. “I don’t think I would ever accumulate thirty days even if I worked in the same place for the rest of my life. I think we’re getting the short end of the stick.”

“There is an interesting story that gets told in Greenland these days, may I share it with you?”

“Of course.”

“It is good that you are here learning firsthand.”

“Huh?”

“Some eye doctors came to Greenland to help with vision problems that people had been experiencing. They noticed that most of the people who needed glasses were the younger generations. The older generation did not need it. They wondered about this. They realized that the younger generations were not only going to school and reading books, but when they came home they would also use a computer or watch television. They weren’t spending as much time outdoors looking in the distance for what to hunt or wondering about future weather conditions. Their eyesight had changed to accommodate these new activities. Activities that the older

generation never knew about.“

She realized she didn't quite understand Lars' story. "What is the lesson?"

"Too much knowledge and lack of experience can make one shortsighted."