Chapter One
The Challenge

"What is your purpose? Does life have meaning? I ask this especially in reference to those people who do not have a faith or the ability to consider the concept of eternal life. I know that every action must have meaning even if it just satisfies an immediate need.

"A fly, for instance, landing on a speck of manure has meaning. A lion chasing an antelope or a bee hovering toward a flower, all have meaning. That meaning, however, is uncomplicated and singular. It is to get food and to not be food. What about mankind?"

These are the questions my friend suddenly presented to me at a visit to my home after not seeing each other for several years. He is a theologian and philosopher and we have had many such discussions in the past. We lost contact after he had taken up a position as professor of theology at a prestigious university.

We then lived on two different continents and the time difference was too great to allow us the opportunity to continue our deep discussions. I am a medical doctor with a keen interest in physics, chaos theory, and the impact of change on human behaviour and mental stability. So, despite our very challenging discussions in the past, this question took me back a little. I was not prepared for such a deep and abstract initiation.

Yet, he was serious. He did not ask it because he knew the answer and wanted to have an opportunity to display it. Nor did he seem to think that I knew the answer. It was an open challenge. I responded that it was a very strange and difficult question, one that I was sure many people would have asked throughout the centuries.

"Now that you ask it, however, I am consumed with the thought that the human being is perhaps the only living creature that will ever ask that question."

I then asked him if he could ever conceive of any other living creature asking it. His response was an unexpected, “Why not?” I immediately and nonchalantly replied that it is because no other living animal, or insect, or bird needs to ask it. “We humans have a more complex need for meaning. The reason for this is that the human being is quite an enigma. Each person will display characteristics that are unique to themselves. In other words, we do not naturally function as a herd or species. Each of us functions as an individual unique to ourselves.

“Look at other creatures. A fly, for example, does what a fly will do, nothing else. A bee will naturally build an intricate hive and go about gathering nectar to fill it. A bee can be predicted to do so naturally, and that is all it really does. No matter how complicated is the product, the species dictates what the product is, and the creature will just do that in its lifetime.

“Look at the higher species in the animal kingdom. Even the ape or chimpanzee will only do what that species is destined to do. Each defined group will do the same thing wherever they live without having to learn from the other. And they do not generally deviate from the norm. Not so the human being.

“Yes, we may have some similarities in our physical structure, even as precise as the genetic structure. Yet, no two people are alike in the way we display ourselves or as we think. Even identical twins, though they may look alike, will each display a unique personality and expression of capabilities, one from the other. So now, may I ask you why did you pose that question?”

He looked at me seriously. “My friend, I have a problem. It is not with me but it affects me tremendously and I believe you have the means, if not to offer a solution I can use, at least to let us come to a solution that can be generally useful.

“I know that you have built a career working with people who have gone astray into drug abuse, alcoholism, and even criminal behaviour. I used to see these people as just not having a purpose. I once even saw them as disturbed or distorted so they could not function at full capacity.

“I did not disregard them but I saw them as broken humans who could simply be encouraged to see themselves as children within God’s sight. I worked with them through prayer and encouragement but I never tried to normalize them. I felt it was out of my expertise.

“I am sorry; I may have been somewhat dismissive of them then. However, I am seeing the same types of behaviour among the youth and young university students. Drug use has become so rampant that many are failing or just dropping out with no skill sets and little knowledge to go forward competently in life. They

live seemingly without purpose."

"My dear professor," I responded, "we are living in very disruptive times. And yes, this is playing havoc with almost everyone. Yet that does not release us from having to face composedly the challenges the disruption brings, or we'd be left stranded only with an excuse to give up.

"I do agree that it does raise concerns such as those you brought up today. You know, as I think of it, what you are seeing is a magnification or perhaps an extension of what I saw and tried, in the past, to bring to the attention of those who were in the helping field.

"So, now let us get back to your original question. What is our purpose? Why do we live? Isn't that a question that has been asked by man since the dawn of time? You have already alluded to the answer. Unlike any other life form that follows a singular path, the human being establishes an individuality that is unique to each person.

"Even if the path of any other life form may seem sophisticated, the path still remains relatively consistent and specific to that species. A tiger, for example, will hunt in a way that is specific to tigers. Even a tiger that is born in captivity will display the pattern of hunting that is unique to its species.

"Yes, in the wild, the cub follows the path of the mother and has been presumed to learn from her. But that has not been any more than a presumption. It may also be only a progressive exposure that allows the maturation of its instinct.

"Even a cub brought up in captivity may not have that opportunity and may not be able to hunt in the manner of the species. That cub, however, is also generally unable to function in the wild, let alone to hunt. Is it possible that even instinct has to mature by being allowed to be used in a progressive manner?

"We may also observe that it does not develop an alternative path. Such a cub will simply retreat or stay attached to its comfort zone. So, it is not that it will develop a path for hunting that it creates especially for itself. It just will be afraid to go into the wild until it becomes accustomed to its environment.

"Then, it will hunt as the species will, without having any special guidance to do it. The individuality in such a creature lies in following its path as inherited. Therefore, though a tiger will roam alone in its path, a tiger in India will demonstrate the same pattern of behaviour as a tiger in China or Russia.

“It does not appear to develop a unique style; it must, therefore, be conceivably the maturation of a defined trait. Look, the same can even be said of insects or plants another organic species. A spider will spin a complex and sophisticated web.

“Yet, a spider of the same species in a faraway country will spin the same web just as intricately. A plant may not move around but it naturally will produce a fruit as its species will dictate. An apple tree will produce apples of its variety. It does not have the option to produce a different type of apple or pear.

“In all of these other life forms, there is no variation and thus no confusion about purpose. That variation and individuality seems to exist only in the human being. The confusion, therefore, can arguably emerge only in the human being.

“I bring up this explanation only that I may emphasize the unique nature of human beings so we can explore undistractedly why that question you asked is so pervasive in every generation. Only then will we be able to build a logical direction through which we may find the answer. As I mentioned before, we are a rather enigmatic species and we enter this life without an instruction manual.

“So now, professor, let us explore your problem.”

“At last, doctor, we come to my predicament. I’ve been waiting patiently but enjoying your remarks. At least they tell me that you may understand my problem. And hopefully bring me to a plausible solution. I will try to expand on my predicament to let you know that my concern is not only with the young people that I teach but with youth everywhere, the youth of the modern world.

“Look, when I was working with adults who seemed to have no purpose, who always went back to their lifestyle no matter how much I tried to tell them about salvation, it was seemingly easy for me to conclude that they may have had a disorder that makes this realization difficult, but youth?

“An adult who loses their sense of purpose can still work on regaining it if he or she chooses. An adolescent or young adult is still our responsibility to teach a sense of purpose. What if we too just don’t know? What if we give them the wrong direction?

“Then they may either reject it or fail while trying to follow our guidance. I am beginning to become afraid, and I do want to be better prepared to steer my youth, so that if these conditions come calling, they are better prepared to face them with some sort of certainty.

“I know it is a hard task, but as you said, we come to this life without an instruction manual. So, they depend on us to show them the path. What if we

steer them wrong? What if they follow our guidance and fail? You see? It is our fault if they do not have a firm sense of purpose, if they feel lost in this world we have brought them into."

"Okay, okay. Professor, I get your point. So, if we are to examine this properly, may I do it my way? There is a predicament. There is a cause. There is a solution. We cannot address them all at the same time. So, let us first look into the predicament a bit deeper.

"I see that life today seems full of turmoil and discord. Everything seems to attack and disturb the serene pastoral life that we innately all desire. We older people are feeling the pressure and we tolerate it as mostly an outside interference that impacts us but is not important to our sense of purpose.

"That turmoil and discord, however, are part of the culture of today's youth. Today's youth refer to it as the noises in their lives. These noises seem to establish more than influence the very definition of self among the majority of young people and many adults today.

"They consequently seem to be drawn to build an existence that is based on physical survival and to living aimlessly while trying to ignore these conditions. So, they are or seem to be lost in this kaleidoscope of challenges that keep coming without respite. I say lost. Many will not agree.

"They see this contrived existence of basic survival and aimless living as their reality and they struggle to be part of it, but that is their goal, to just be part of it. That, however, seems to become their only goal, a desire to be part of that world, even redefining themselves according to the dictates of these conditions, at least the way they see them.

"When the struggle becomes overwhelming, or perhaps as a means of saving themselves from the exasperating demands of that struggle, they seem to divert or distract themselves by engaging in activities that are easy to obtain or to use."

"What exactly are you saying, doctor?"

"Think, professor. Think of drugs. Drugs are easily acquired, easy to use, and give a temporary, artificial escape from the stresses they cannot handle. Or perhaps sex as in promiscuity or redefining their gender so they can fit within an accepted norm? Or shopping? You don't have to have training to do these. Internet games and social networking also come into this group.

"They spend more time and energy in the pursuit of entertainment, toys that entertain or stimulate while they enjoy them passively, or they just engage in sexual indiscretion without emotion or romance. Then, the apparently insatiable

thirst for chemicals and alcohol allows them to indulge with reckless abandon even to the point of self-destruction.

"Unfortunately, while they seek the simple, self-consoling existence, they neglect the need to build self. Then, they distort themselves to fit into the world or that part of it that encourages such distractions. Our youth appear to be content just getting by as long as they have the means to get the things they see as necessary for them to have pleasure, comfort or simple survival."

"Well doctor, have you ever heard of the 'woke' movement?"

"Yes," I responded. "I have read about it, but what does it have to do with your concern about youth?"

"Ha, doctor," he immediately responded with a self-satisfied chuckle. "It has everything to do with it. The 'woke' movement started as an attempt to prevent the prejudicial condemnation or disregard for a person because of the colour of their skin.

"It evolved into a wide range of specific definitions that allowed people to feel accepted by being part of whatever group they choose to associate with their identity. I am well aware that, when someone, anyone, feels lost or, let's say, unsure of their value as a person, they tend to create an identity that is defined and attached to something that they can share with others.

"This allows them to belong, if not to the whole of society at least to some aspect of it. Unfortunately, if we disregard or condemn that definition of identity, we are seen as disregarding or condemning the person who is defined by it. Then, they will protect that identity as it is also the protection of themselves as defined by that reality.

"So, it fits in that is how the woke movement has been expanded to include a whole range of identity definitions."

I responded by offering the observation that this goes back to our initial discussion of man, the human race, being the only life form that is inclined to look for a definition of themselves, a search for identity.

"You see?" I offered. "We have to look for that because each person is unique. So really, you are placing that common, innate need to have a unique identity or even purpose into a visible activity. Yet, having defined a trend, you still need to show how this can fit into a pattern or formula."

"I still must ask, what does that have to do with youth? Do we condemn youth for being young? Dear doctor, don't you see? If we are responsible for enlightening youth or perhaps more specifically our children even before they

become youth, about their purpose as human beings, this tendency to grasp blindly to get a sense of identity is a revelation of our failure. We are failing our youth."

"Ah, I am beginning to get your concern, professor, and you are probably right, but are you not also condemning us for not doing what we really do not know how to do?"

I felt trapped. "You have brought to me a very difficult challenge. You are not just talking about the woke movement or the confusion of youth. You are talking about the confusion of mankind. It is almost that we have emerged here, in this life, with a responsibility to figure out who or what or why we exist, not just as a life form but as one that exists as a singular entity.

"We do not seem to follow a common pattern. Yet, there is a need to create a pattern we must then follow. Goodness, this is getting complicated. Yet, my friend, isn't this what is also unique about human beings, that once we see a problem we are inextricably drawn into solving it? Therefore, let us do just that.

"You know that I like to solve problems by looking for a common thread and then analyzing that thread. It saves a lot of time that accumulates because of unnecessary repetition. I am trained as a doctor. If a person comes with a symptom, I cannot just treat the symptom and hope that if it goes away, I have succeeded in managing it.

"I have to look for the cause, and only when I can tie the discovered cause to the emergence of the symptom, will I be competently able to devise a treatment. I, or we, must do that here."

"My dear doctor, I have an observation I would like to share with you. The trend that you have observed in modern youth seems to be no different from the trend we have tended to follow since the dawn of time. As human beings, we have always been drawn to identifying ourselves by belonging to a tribe.

"That tribe will display themselves according to a pattern unique to them. Tribes became nations. Nations fought against nations because of the perceived superiority of that group having a uniquely common thrust that defines them. To deride that common nature is to deride the person.

"It seems that we wanted to 'grow up' to be like the lower animal species, a contradiction of sorts. Later, we grouped ourselves into religions, a distinction made, not by appearance or behaviour, but by attitude. And we did the same thing as primitive tribes did.

“We fought, condemned, recruited, converted, all because each group was convinced that their attitude, bloodline, now DNA was the superior set of conditions that elevated them to a unique, and perhaps a higher position of power.

“This, basically, places our youth in the same category as we have revealed of ourselves. It seems that, after thousands of years, we still have not figured out how to define ourselves within a safe and stable context. It seems, therefore, that, we are really not any better able to guide them to a true understanding of themselves than they are. It is just that they are doing the same thing, only differently. Isn’t that the proverbial definition of insanity?”

“Okay, my dear professor, I do not want to discourage you. You have recognized a worrisome effect and we must try to solve that problem. We are only beginning to discover the source, and we have only scratched the surface.” “Well doctor, that predicament does not seem to be very encouraging. It seems that we are dallying in an unnecessary pursuit while the real problem remains unaddressed. It seems well and good to now realize that our youth are simply doing the same thing we have done.

“Yet, they are suffering greater effects than we did. The death rate from accidental overdoses of chemicals is getting too high, especially among youth. The lack of morals or ambition is rampant. The laissez-faire attitude, like zombies, just existing until the inevitable death comes, seems astounding. How are we going to fix that before it is too late for the majority of youth, and thus humanity?”

“Patience, my friend,” I retorted. “I am not being unnecessarily verbose. I am trying to understand the cause. We cannot solve a problem effectively by just covering it up. We have to get at the root and fix the source. And we haven’t yet connected the problem with the first level of discovery we have made.

“All we know so far is that there is a tendency to try to create an identity based on fixed or measurable attributes. We also know that there are two major outcomes when a person, a human being, tries to form themselves into a predetermined identity.

“One is that they try to become what that identity dictates leaving them able to function only within that cohort and still uncertain or confused in the greater part of the world. The other is that their feeling of security remains insufficient and any attempt to apply themselves to life ends up as failure.

“In each case, the emptiness within prevails, leaving a hole within the very soul. They then seek to escape the reality that appears to create a hole in the soul using the easy solution of drugs or alcohol, not to heal the hole, but to escape the reality that seems to cause it. We still, however, do not really know how those two conditions, the feeling of emptiness and the use of drugs, connect.”

“Therefore, dear doctor, we seem to be still talking about the same condition of defining a sense of identity or purpose. Shouldn’t we first examine that tendency to escape so we can identify it at its origin not just when it has been established and the task becomes much more difficult?

“I know that sometimes it is the ability to fit into a packaged definition of self that allows some people to become successful and fulfilled simply because it relieves them of that wretched experience of feeling lost. These individuals may appear successful, at least visually.

“They do not generally fall out and use the escape hatch just to soothe the feelings of uncertainty or isolation. These people, however, won’t want to explore further. You know, there are people who will say that it is only since they have accepted that particular definition of self that they have become confident and capable.

“They will resist any invitation to examine themselves a little deeper. You may know the old adage, ‘If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’. They may feel smug while the state of belonging allows them a sense of identity no matter how specific or even superficial it may be.

“This can also include religious or cultural identities. Of course, we do not know what they feel within and are often surprised when an apparently well-balanced and successful person falls apart or reveals a personal uncertainty or fear.

“Please understand that the ‘woke’ movement, designed to defend a group who were specifically targeted, has spawned a sort of backward movement. People who feel lost or uncertain, or just different will define themselves by a specific property and gather in groups of similarly identified people so they can create both a defense for themselves within that category and a community within which they can feel accepted.

“Youth, and even adults who behave or function as youth, have taken to creating definitions for themselves that give them a different path to that sought after state of laissez-faire. I know that term you used a while back refers to the

desire to be relieved from direction or interference and be left to do whatever they want or prefer.

"I see that they use it to give themselves the opportunity and right to function within the limitations tolerated or advocated by that definition of identity. Then they are free from the requirement to do more because that limitation allows them to just exist. Do you see my fear?

"It is that the youth who are lost or uncertain simply because they have not yet had the opportunity or direction to build a mature definition of self will gravitate to these groups because it lets them take the easy route of just existing and having the right to be left to do just that.

"They see our intervention as trying to cheat them of their opportunity to exist unmolested. Yet, we may simply want to give them a sense of personal identity or a purpose for living that is more than just existing."

As I listened to the passion with which my friend presented his concern, I became more drawn to the desire to examine it more closely. So, I asked him, "My friend, in your description of these woke enclaves, you show that they do not function the same as the types we recognized before, then isn't the person who focuses only on superficial pleasures, easy living, or the use of drugs and alcohol to fit in with that enclave not also steering themselves to a state of laissez-faire?

"In other words, the goal is not using the drug or the alcohol or the indolence. It is the achievement of freedom from demands or expectations, that is, the requirement to build and display a power of self, that unique capacity that defines the person. It may be something they feel they do not have or do not have to a comfortable degree.

"When we do not have it or when what we have embraced just to give us meaning does not offer that strength, we can feel lost, alone, insufficient, that feeling of a hole in the soul. Then, the need to segue toward a temporary reprieve becomes urgent. Don't you agree?"

"Yes, yes, my dear doctor, you see that is what I am now beginning to understand. The movement is not just to the specific activity. It is to the freedom it gives."

"So, my dear professor, are you saying that the youth who use drugs or alcohol are not just addicted to these substances because of a specific distortion of some unidentified function in their bodies? Then, you are saying what I have been discussing with you forever, that these are just the routes they may use to

enable a state of calm or freedom from the responsibilities and impositions of life they are poorly prepared to face.

"I know that we were discussing the adult community as that is where my work has taken me. I acknowledge, however, that youth are simply in the transition between childhood and adulthood. I guess that we can state that a youth is actually the baby adult.

"So now, you are really saying that even adults have their needs defined first as the youth. They establish the route of choice during the formative years and allow it to become fixated when life gets tough. I agree. I see that you are thinking deeper than the surface."

"Of course, doctor. You were a good teacher. I have been looking deeper than the surface but I fear that I am stuck."

My interest was beginning to pique. "Give me a bit more information. You say you are concerned for the youth. If, as we have deduced, the real problem starts in the formative years and that the route to choose simplicity over responsibility is established as the youth enters adulthood, you have already satisfied the first requirement for a successful analysis of a problem or predicament.

"You have concocted a formula that allows us the ability to solve the predicament regardless of how the predicament is structured. As a result professor, it seems that we have come to the conclusion that, regardless of the direction taken - drugs, alcohol, entertainment, sports and games, sexual indiscretion, partying, hanging out lazily or irresponsibly and now, having a definition of self that allows laissez-faire - it is becoming more evident that the real problem is quite central and commonplace.

"It is the need to fill that hole in the soul, and it seems easier to do so by having a simplified, easy or comforting reality. And is it that the choice may have been selected randomly? Or maybe it was provided by a trusted person who was trying to do the same thing?

"In this latter case, I can see a youth who may be feeing lost or lonely or even confused for the moment and does not understand what is happening being vulnerable to the offer of some form of comfort. Then, a friend gives a drink, or a joint of weed, or the invitation to belong within an accepting community with a reassurance that this will help them feel better.

"So, the youth tries it, feels relieved albeit in a superficial way, and transfers the feeling of relief to the power of the drug or the strength of the community.

They do not know they are only altering the perception of reality, not reality itself. Yet, the feelings of relief remain. The next time they feel similarly confused or overwhelmed, though for different reasons, it is easy to reach for the ready-made solution.

"Thus, a pathway of choice is established. I will suggest that this is neither a dependency nor an addiction. Rather, it is a path to an easy solution that can become established if taken too seriously.

"You are also, therefore, not speaking only about youth. You are showing that even the adult who chooses a path that allows the escape from having to look deeper into themselves, even if as a temporary respite, is doing so because the alternative of looking inside at something that seems undefinable demands more or greater capability than the person has.

"The world of the adult is far more complex than is the world of the child or the youth. So, as the youth enters into the world of adulthood, the new or greater demands can evoke a spiral that sucks them into its vortex.

"However, today, the world of the adult appears to be invading the world of the youth and, far more worrisomely, that of the child. Therefore, are you saying that the excesses of those behaviours or routes of escape that the adult demonstrates and have been considered diseases or addictions or psychological aberrances are now beginning to appear in the youth?

"If you are right, then we will have to decide whether these are not diseases in the adult, or that maybe the disease may have been created as a result of sustained or repeated conditioning. Do you remember telling me earlier that you once felt that the adult who seems locked in such behaviour was either disturbed or diseased?"

"Yes, I do recall that."

"Are you now willing to see that what you saw as the disease is the effect of the attempt to escape the harsh reality and discover a more consoling one?"

"Yes, but is that not flying into the face of traditional science?"

"Of course it does, but is that not what makes science progress? Think of Galileo, Tesla, Newton or Semmelweis. Yet, it does not matter if that path leads to an alteration only of the perception of reality, not reality itself. These people are willing to take what seems like the easy option even if it is an illusion.

"The other consideration and I believe that is why you are here, is that, if we can solve it in the youth, we will reduce or eliminate it in the adult. Wow, this is brilliant. Let us dig deeper. A big part of this equation must then be, 'What

defines the youth?' But let us discuss that later. We have more important problems to solve right now."

My friend, the theologian, now hit me with a beautiful challenge. "What about criminal behaviour? Does that fit into the formula? Or is it a separate entity that should be examined differently? If we are going to look deeper to find the source of the formula, shouldn't we also consider criminal behaviour?

"It is just another way to elicit a display of self. Can it, therefore, be a display from someone who is also trying to belong within an enclave? Is it simply the act of one who, having failed to establish a personal identity, is using it as somewhat of an 'easy button' to escape the demands of regular life?"

"My response to your questions, my dear professor, is a resounding 'Yes!' That is, it is a yes to both. Some people will commit a criminal act just to qualify as a bona fide member of an established community. Others will do it in order to remove an undesired imposition or an attempt to find the means that should provide a comfortable or perhaps less imposing condition even if only for the moment. Think of it. Does it not fit snugly into the formula?

"Let us consider first that the person is overwhelmed by a situation they cannot manage constructively. Let's say the imposing reality is poverty. The person steals in order to buy the food—that is, to change conditions to one of greater satisfaction.

"Does this not offer an easier way to resolve the immediate problem? Or perhaps it can be the desire to have leisure. Now, it is not food but the opportunity to enjoy a comfortable or pleasurable state that is not available without money. On the other hand, a criminal act can be an aggressive act designed to remove what appears to be the source of an imposition or irritation, real or perceived.

"So, a criminal act, like any other apparently inappropriate behaviour, will satisfy the formula that you proposed, right? The need is not the act. It is the imbalance between the conditions outside and the strengths inside. The action is the route taken to restore some semblance of balance or comfort.

"Of course, it also can be the attempt to guarantee that position of presumed immunity by weakening the opposition. This is seen through the other lens as the pursuit of power. The thinking is that, if I am more powerful or at a higher position of authority than the others around me, I will be somewhat immune as they may be afraid to provoke my retaliation. That is, I have, in effect, created a safer place for myself.

“Do you see what we have done? We have taken the three main concerns you have—the attraction to drugs and alcohol, the tendency to attach one’s identity to an easily identified quality shared within a group, and criminal behaviour—and revealed them as activities that are summoned in response to an internal conflict.

“So, we don’t have to focus on changing, suppressing, punishing or worrying about the activity. We have, instead, to determine the source of the internal conflict and find a way to guide the person to eliminate it. We have suggested that the conflict is the lack of a personal sense of purpose causing the demands of life to be seen as unfair impositions or unnecessary distractions to be avoided.”
“Therefore professor, this may seem a bit complex but I am excited by your idea. Let me give you an example that has come to my head. I believe it will explain this rather complex theory with a simple visualization.

“I will start by having you visualize a box of tissues sitting on the table in front of us. I want you to observe the box. Now, may I ask you to please tell me what is the box doing now?”

“Besides holding the paper? I will say that it is doing nothing.”

“Now, visualize something else. I will take a tissue out from the box and I will hold it standing on its edge on my lap. You see a full square of tissue standing on my lap, don’t you?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Now, I will let go of the corners where I am holding it up. Do you see what happens?”

“Of course. It collapses. That’s natural. What does it have to do with the box?”

“Bear with me. Let’s think. Why does the tissue collapse?”

“It is soft. It is fragile. It is not designed with the stiffness to stand on its own.”

“Ah. But what is actually pulling it down? What is acting on the tissue to make it collapse?”

“That’s easy. It is gravity.”

“What? How do you know? Is gravity visible? What do you know about gravity? Is it a strong force or a weak force?”

“My goodness, this is more your field than mine. You once talked with me about Einstein’s proposition of the four fundamental forces. I can’t remember

them now but I will say that gravity is a strong force. If I step off your balcony, I will feel a strong pull toward the ground."

"Yes, and you also observed that the tissue is not designed to be able to resist that force. You have just identified two invisible conditions, the internal strength of the tissue and the external force of gravity, and you have observed that they are not balanced. The greater force of gravity will distort the tissue because it does not have the internal strength to counteract it."

"Wow! I see where you are going. This is the same as the conditions facing the person and the internal strength the person has to counteract it."

"Whoa, whoa! You are going too fast. There is more to observe. Look again at the box. There is a tissue poking out from the slit in the top of the box. Do you see that the tissue is standing firm? It appears to be able to resist the pull of gravity. It can do it from the box but it cannot do it on my lap. Why do you think that is so?"

"That is obvious. It has the support of the box."

"The box that you just told me is doing nothing, you are now telling me that it is providing support to the tissue, invisible support but identifiable nevertheless. So, let me say it differently. The tissue is able to stay in balance with the external force of gravity, a strong force, because it is getting help from the box.

"Do you remember saying that gravity is a strong force? Thus, by providing the strength to resist the strong force of gravity, the box is providing a powerful, supportive action. It must be providing a force more powerful than the tissue is capable of exerting on its own to resist the strong force of gravity.

"It is doing so discreetly and invisibly. So, let us expand our observation. Please humour me and go along. You will see where it will take you later. You have identified gravity. Can you identify any other force acting on this tissue that is extruding from the box? What about wind?"

"We are in a closed room. There is no wind here."

"What is wind other than the movement of air molecules? So, as I move my hands and as I speak to you, am I not stimulating a movement of air molecules? So, there is wind affecting the tissue, maybe not at a level that is readily discerned by the casual observer, but it exists nevertheless. If, however, I exaggerate it by blowing on the tissue, what do you see?"

"It flutters, but if you blow on the tissue on your lap, it will fly away because by itself, it does not have the strength to resist the irritation from the breeze. That

makes me think that, as you blow hot air, people around you may feel the urge to leave. Okay, joking aside, I see that the box is giving strength to this tissue that it does not have on its own."

"Right. We are getting where I want to lead you. Despite your rudeness, may I proceed? What other forces can you identify here in this room?"

"Well, there is heat, humidity."

"Good. These are also forces. They impact the tissue but the box is able to provide an internal strength for the tissue to resist them and stay in balance with those forces. Now, let us go a little deeper. Let me place the box outside on the lawn and leave it there. What do you think will happen?"

"Of course, after a while, the box will succumb to the forces and will also crumble. Those same forces are greater outside than they are inside."

"Yes. That is because the walls of this room are doing for the box and other things in the room what the box, at a different level, is doing for the tissue. The forces are the same. They are just applied at different strengths. Do you see what we are doing?"

"Yes, of course. We are taking what seems to be an obvious situation and looking into the invisible forces that impact it so we can understand how a balanced state can either exist or be made to exist."

"I like your conclusion, professor. It may still be a bit hasty, however, as I want to introduce a new level of observation. The tissue box and the tissue and even the table on which they are resting are inanimate objects, yes? That means that they have fixed internal strengths.

"Yet, they are all three made of the same substance. They are all made of wood. Each however, has been constructed of wood with an internal strength that defines the function of that piece. In other words, despite all being made of wood, the tissue can only be a tissue, not a box or table, and the table cannot be a tissue or box.

"Each one is valued according to its fixed function. I can sit on the table but not on the tissue or the box. However, if I need to blow my nose, neither the box nor the table will do. Each has a value according to its internal strength, and each has an internal strength that fixates its value. Are you still with me?"

"Yes. I am also intrigued where this is going and what it has to do with the predicament we are trying to unravel."

"Have patience, my friend. If, however, I place the tissue, the box, and the table as they are now and leave the room for a week, when I return, they will still

be there, as I left them. They are inanimate objects. Neither of them can decide to go out to the lawn even for a short exploration. So, they will not be exposed nor will they expose themselves to environmental forces that can crush or destroy them.

"You, on the other hand, are different. If I leave you sitting there and return a week later, I will not find you there. You are self-propelled and mobile. You will decide to go out, even for a walk and you will expose yourself to those outside forces.

"So, you cannot rely on a fixed internal strength as do inanimate objects. You must have greater flexibility or range of internal strengths. You and any other organic existences will venture into a wider range of invisible outside forces because of that very quality."

"Yes, yes, I see, but I am anxious to know where you are taking me. I will venture to say that, though I am not bored, I am not sure why you are dissecting something that seems so, well, so obvious and uninteresting."

"Have you ever heard of a man named Walter Cannon?"

"No, but I am sure you will enlighten me."

"He was a professor and chairman of the Department of Physiology at Harvard Medical School from 1906 to 1942. One of his studies was the observation of animals in the wild during which he recognized that an animal's body will change when it is exposed to threats from the environment.

"There are various components to this change. The ears will prick. The breathing increases. The pupils will dilate; the muscles will become tense and the heartbeat increases. In 1916, he published his observations as the 'fight or flight' response to external threats. So, you see?

"You know his discovery without knowing him. What he observed, however, can be summarized as the physiological responses that prepared the animal to increase its internal strengths to allow it to seek a balance. One is by attacking the opposition—the fight response. The other is by exiting the confrontation—the flight response.

"Either response requires an internal strength that is greater than the resting strength. The organic life form has that flexibility. I guess that it can be compared with the tissue seeing you come to sit on it having the capacity to tighten the fibers so it is strong enough to accept your weight.

"Perhaps it is the desk, observing that you need to blow your nose, having the option of relaxing its fibers, so it is soft enough to be taken to your nose. Of

course, this latter example is preposterous but I use it to emphasize the flexibility of the physiological response.

"Soon after Professor Cannon published his observations, the fight/flight response was discovered to be mediated through the body's release of adrenaline, a then recently discovered hormone. We discovered that adrenaline, released from the adrenal glands, caused the body's cells to work faster and harder.

"There is a problem with this response, however. This is that it works by stimulating the faster use of glucose stored in the cells. This, of course, depletes the cell's glucose stores, leading to a weakening or complete stoppage of function if the demand gets too intense or too prolonged."

"Okay, okay. That is somewhat interesting but, what does it have to do with the original discussion? We were talking about youth and their tendency to run away to drugs or to use the 'easy button' to make life more pleasant. Uh oh, you are being sneaky. You are designing a formula. And it includes criminal behaviour. Alright, I'll go along."

"You see? The fight/flight response is somewhat limited and, if used too intensely, can actually harm the body. So, in your estimation how does a wild animal survive under great threat? If a deer, for instance, sees a pride of lions, does it exhaust its cellular strength by the intensity of its fear or of its attempt to fight a superior force that it falls down and becomes an easy dinner? What about a herd of deer? Does the whole herd get exhausted and invite a full feast?"

"Ha-ha. Is that a question or a challenge? We know that does not happen."

"You see, when the lions grab their prey, they are focused on eating. The lions are no longer a threat to the herd of deer. So, the herd will slow down; their demands for adrenaline will decrease and the cells will rebuild the glucose stores. And the cycle is ready to be repeated.

"Now, I want to lead you to the human response, but before I do, I want to make a slight correction. The idea of the adrenaline response being the initiator was suggested around 1916. We have since discovered that the adrenaline response is associated with other hormones stimulated at the level of the limbic system of the brain.

"It is also known as the paleo-mammalian brain. This means is that it has been part of every organic life form even back to the primitive or archaic eras. The fight/flight response, therefore, is an inbred response that every organic life form uses."

"So doctor, are you saying that even the human being uses the limbic system? And even the human being will go into a fight/flight posture when threatened?"

"Yes, but there is more."

"Goodness, I was beginning to think we had exhausted that examination. Now, I have to continue wearing my thinking cap. Okay, I am ready."

"There are no experiments on that, so we have to do one now."

"Right. I did not realize that my visit here would mean being a guinea pig."

"No, not that type of experiment, just one that requires you to think. Just imagine that you are sitting alone at home one day. You are reading a good book, perhaps something I have written. Alright, I'm just kidding! You are listening to some good music and you are drawn into a state of complete relaxation. Then you hear the sound of footsteps walking firmly toward the door behind you and someone opens the door. What is your immediate reaction?"

"I'll jump behind the couch and hide. Okay, only kidding. I'll check the doorway."

"I want your first reaction, the very first response you notice in yourself." "I guess I'll be startled. My heart will race and I'll come out of my reverie and become more alert. Ah yes, I will initiate the fight/flight response."

"Yes. This is an automatic response from the limbic system. It is what will occur in every organic species, from the lion to the mouse, to the fly. What is your next response?"

"I will check the doorway."

"When you check, you see that it is your favorite twin brother who has come by to visit. What happens next?"

"Of course, I go and hug him as I feel comfortable with him."

"I asked what happens next. That happens later. What is the first thing you notice when you see him?"

"Oh, the adrenaline response subsides."

"Yes. Yet, the disturbance is still there, however, your reason takes over. You can calm the limbic system even though it is being stimulated by the presence of an intrusion. It makes the intrusion less of a threat without the need for the fight/flight option.

"Reason can turn off or perhaps replace the instinctive limbic system. Good. Now let us change the condition. When, in your alerted state, you check the doorway, you see a man with a gun. What happens next?"

"Are you asking before I clean up the fluid I just emitted from my bladder? Okay, I'll go along. I will notice an increase of the adrenaline response. I will become more alert and maybe more ready to do something to defend myself using the fight/flight mode."

"Good observation, professor. Yet, the disturbance is still the same. It is just a disturbance made by the presence of someone at your door. That is all that the limbic system sees. Reason, however, recognizes that the disturbance offers a greater threat.

"He is a stranger with a hidden intent and a weapon with which he can express that intent. You do not know what the intent is. However, the unknown contains a massive range of possibilities that makes the threat extreme. So, though the disturbance is still the same, it brings with it a huge threat and you will respond to that threat using the fight/flight response to the degree of the threat because the force of reason is not able to assess and contain the threat.

"Now, let us adjust the conditions further. You happen to have grown up in a family where your father knew a lot about guns, and he taught you everything about guns. You know how to identify and determine the capabilities and failings of any gun.

"You have read extensively about guns, and you are confident in your knowledge and expertise with guns. That day, when you check the doorway and the man standing at the entrance, you look at the gun. With your knowledge, you are able to confidently ascertain that it is a toy, one that cannot even be adapted to shoot bullets. You look at the man and see that he is a frail, old man. What happens next?"

"I guess I will laugh and ask him what he wants. Okay, before you correct me, I know what you are asking. Yes, the adrenaline response subsides. I suppose you are now going to tell me why and I am ready to hear your logical explanation."

"My friend, you know I am not trying to trick you. There is a real logic to this. Again, the disturbance is the same as the first condition. What made this less a threat is the recognition at the cognitive level that the strength of the invading condition is limited and manageable using reason.

"There is a weakness in the body of the intruder and the instrument has no power. You relieve the limbic system because the disturbance does not present a threat that cannot be addressed rationally. So now, let us put together what our observations have provided us.

"The first is that there are invisible forces that disturb the tranquility we wish to enjoy. It is not a tranquility made by the absence of a threat. Rather, it is one that is caused by a state of balance between what is outside and what in inside. So, even if there is activity outside, there is only a threat if that activity introduces an imbalance that cannot be adjusted. When it is adjusted, tranquility will result.

"The material object cannot adjust, so it is purely at the mercy of the outside forces. If I place my table on the lawn and a storm comes, the table will be damaged. I can keep that table in good condition if I make sure that it is kept in a protected environment like my living room."

"Of course that depends on if your bumbling friend does not spill hot coffee all over it."

"Can you, therefore, see professor, that a disturbance can arise from any source at any time and precipitate a disturbance unexpectedly and unpredictably?"

"Yes doctor, I can see the whole picture better now. I see that inanimate objects have a structural strength that is fixed and limited by design. Animate objects also have that structural strength plus a flexible internal strength that is based on physiology.

"That strength is not fixed but it has a ceiling. Of course, with adequate nutrition and exercise, I suppose that it, the physiological strength, can be extended, still to a ceiling, though at a higher level. Rational beings, such as the human being, have these two plus a strength that is based on reason. Reason will have infinite potential and infinite power. It, however, must be activated and energized."

"You have summarized it well, my friend. Do you know the power of reason? Have you ever had something to do that seems totally unfamiliar, but you are required to do it?"

"Of course. Everyone does at some time or other. It can seem huge, impossible to manage."

"Yes, even formidable. What happens when you understand it, or have gathered enough information to understand it?"

"Okay, then it becomes easy. Understanding gives me clarity."

"Yet, the challenge has not changed. It is the same challenge that seemed formidable. What changed is you. Reason produces understanding and understanding is a power that can be applied to a situation. With understanding, you do not need to stretch the limited physiological resources or overdo the

fight/flight response. You create the balance by applying understanding. And that can only happen because you have built the understanding.

"My dear professor, you have presented me with a predicament, a perpetually expanding problem that seems to be affecting all of humanity, from the adult down to the child. We have examined the predicament and realized that it follows a pattern or a formula.

"We have concluded that the problem exists because there is a perpetual state of imbalance between two opposing forces, an external force that intrudes or imposes its demands, and an internal force that exerts resistance or reaction. We have also recognized that the internal strength of the human being appears to have two components.

"One is common to all organic species and it determines the physical or immediate response. It can also explain one of the observations we made at the start. This is that the range of responses of all common organic life forms appears to be driven by an instinctive capacity which appears to be common to that species.

"The range or expandability of this capacity seems to be limited and relatively contained. The other is unique to man and is an invisible capacity that must be developed. We have concluded that, when the external conditions change or are applied to the person, a state of imbalance exists that causes discomfort.

"As with all organic life forms, an instinctive response is initiated to counteract the imbalance and relieve the discomfort. With the human being, another force comes into play. This is the force of reason but is one that must be activated and developed or built for it to have an impact.

"When built, it can take over and manage the imbalance. It is the development of this that distinguishes each person as the individual. It is developed through childhood and throughout the succeeding years, and what is developed is unique to that person.

"When or if it has not been developed or if it has not been developed sufficiently, the person can feel compromised leading to the responses we discussed earlier. We have seen that, when that special attribute of each human being is undeveloped, the responsibility to give account of self can be unreachable.

"Then the person is relegated to function as does the lower species and rely on a limbic system that is not as developed as powerfully as it is in those life

forms that rely on it. To save face, or to provide some sort of security from the elements it is quite understandable that people so affected will attempt to stabilize their environment by belonging to a section of it that stays in balance with the immediate reality.

"Otherwise, they will be left to the limitations of their limbic responses and succumb to the fight/flight options. Now, do you see what we have accomplished? We have been able to get inside and observe some properties of the human being that are generally invisible to examination by even the most sophisticated instrument.

"We have also been able to place those undesirable behaviours into one single response pattern. So, we do not have to try to deal with each manifestation of a common condition. What is being displayed among your youth and among my older adults is not necessarily a formidable imposition that is unique to them.

"Rather, it is an insufficiency in that special quality of the human being that gives us greater resilience than other life forms. It is the deficiency in the power of reason."

"Yes doctor, it seems that you are alluding to a totally different and unique approach to people's difficulties dealing with life challenges. It is not the weight of the stresses but the insufficiency of that most important and powerful attribute of reason.

"This power seems to be what we are required to discover and develop. But what really is that power or attribute? Let us be forthright and acknowledge that, if we have to build something, should we not be able to define or locate it first?"
"Ah my dear professor, it is a quality that is so invisible that, though everyone experiences it, none of us can pinpoint its location. We can only attempt to deduce it logically. First, however, we must examine the reality we occupy and find out how it impacts us so that we can know the enemy, so to speak.

"Then, we have to examine how to discover something that is so invisible that it cannot be measured or defined. I will tease you with a visualization so you will have an inkling where we need to go.

"I will tell you that an initial observation you made that it is our responsibility to steer our youth to build the attribute that is in themselves is quite astute and necessary. We have to teach them purpose, but first we have to know it ourselves. Now, here is my little anecdote."

“Have you ever seen a person who has never been in a canoe before try to paddle a canoe? It looks like an exercise in frustration, doesn’t it? He sits awkwardly on one of the seats and gingerly paddles, first on the right, and then on the left. The canoe travels in a zigzag motion because canoes do not have a keel to stabilize their movement in the water.

“On a smooth lake, it may even be a pleasant experience even though the canoe travels in an irregular path. Now, suppose such a person sets out bravely enjoying a glassy-smooth lake early one morning. The irregular path doesn’t concern him as he stays close to the shore, or secure within a small bay. Now, let us suppose that a young teenager with a fast motor boat zooms by close to this intrepid but inexperienced canoeist.

“What happens next is not difficult to visualize. The canoe rocks on the uneven water and may even capsize. What does he do? His immediate response may be to return to shore and vow never to canoe again—a flight response. He may become angry (with the inconsiderate youth) and even arrange with authorities to ban early morning motor boating—the fight response.

“Or he may, with stoic determination, get up earlier the next morning to beat the traffic, so to speak. Finally, he may simply right the boat and keep trying—the ‘submit or accommodate’ response. These options may seem reasonable at first. At least they stop the immediate problem, but does it manage the condition that is challenging him?

“What if he takes the first option and never canoes again? There are other activities he can do, but he will lose out on a potentially pleasurable activity. The second option of controlling the variables with authority may work if he has the power, but what about forces of nature that won’t bow to the restrictions of even a cottage owner’s lobby?

“The third option of trying harder with stoic determination will eventually give in to the frustrations as other variables will arise from other sources he can neither anticipate nor control.

“What about learning to canoe? If he takes this option, he will first learn that the canoe is an unstable craft. It is light and has no keel. So, it slides on the surface of the water, a fundamental asset of canoeing. But this is its fundamental weakness also.

“So to offset this, he learns first that the seat is not for sitting. It is to be used as a brace as he kneels deeply into the canoe. This allows the center of gravity to be lowered and thus stabilize the craft. Then, he learns the J-stroke, a manoeuvre

that automatically compensates for the sideward movement of the keel-less craft and points it straight ahead.

“Then, he actually feels secure, not because he has succeeded in better reacting to the problem when it emerges, but because he has risen intellectually and rationally above the problem. He can actually captain the boat and it feels good.

“A motor boat comes by and it rocks the boat, but it feels good, in fact, exhilarating. He even dares the pilot to create a deeper wave, so he can feel the excitement of riding it. He can go to the other side without fear of the weather because he knows he can adapt to the changes the weather can introduce. He has conquered that challenge.

“Isn’t it the same with life? We fight the stresses, find ways to avoid them, or simply try harder and reach burnout or physical exhaustion and discouragement or mental exhaustion that may then be treated with a vast range of modifiers as a problem of unknown origin, not one caused by simple mismanagement.

“I once was that person in a canoe. But I chose the fourth option and now enjoy canoeing tremendously. I once was that person in life, but I chose the fourth option and now enjoy my challenges with passion. Do you see what I am saying? We can respond to the end condition or we can deal with the source.

“There can be so many manifestations of end conditions that we can easily get exhausted keeping pace. Yet, by better understanding the source, we can make the end condition easy to manage. I guess that we do not have to escape the quagmires we encounter in life.

“We learn how to examine, analyze and manage the conditions that give birth to them. Then, we can extricate ourselves out of them or perhaps continue moving forward immune to their persistent presence.

“I guess that I am saying that it is up to each of us to manage and teach others, especially our children, how to canoe in life, so they can become focused youth and then adults who can also teach their children. We do not do it by safeguarding their world and telling them to have fun.

“We have to show them the assets and limitations of their inner strength, what they have for overcoming the limitations and how to use the assets purposefully. First, however, we have to learn them ourselves. Life is complex. It cannot be solved with a simple solution.

“Let’s see how this fits into your formula and how we can apply it to help youth and even adults to design a more balanced interaction with our rather capricious environment.”

“Doctor, I appreciate all that we have discussed and all the information you have shared. You have opened my eyes to quite a few things I have not considered before. I do, however, feel that you haven’t answered my original question.

“I asked what is the purpose or meaning of life and perhaps, if there is something beyond my faith I can use to help others who do not have that exposure. You have not answered my question.

“You have, however, explored why there must be meaning, showing that the human being functions, not on instinct reacting to the immediate conditions, but on reason. Each act must have a meaning that determines how we function. That conclusion does not tell me what meaning is.”

“You are right, professor. We did not reach that stage in our discussion. At least, we have determined that there must be meaning as we do not exist just to live. Look at you. You have studied many thousands of hours just to know more. No other species in life will do that.

“The ‘what’, therefore, has to be developed over time as it is a complex search that challenges what we believe and before that, we must examine ‘the abstract’ or ‘unknown’ quite diligently.”