

Chapter Nine Concerning Education



he small party rode roughly eastward for a few miles, as the path rose along one of the many alluvial fans that contributed their silt to the local topography, until they came to a small spring with an enclosed pond. They filled their water flasks and allowed the horses to drink and graze for a bit while they snacked on bread and fruit. Pen laughed out loud when she realized that food had become as much a part of her activities in this new place as it had been in stories she'd read as a child. She explained to her companions that when she was a bit older than Lirit she had loved British children's adventure stories, in which the characters had become involved with smugglers and other nefarious types, but who always managed to discover caches of tinned food in unlikely places, and were thus able to satisfy childhood appetites in more ways than one. It occurred to her that the memory had to do with the sheer pleasure engendered by this food and this trip; the children in these stories had experienced "adventures" such as this, and enjoyed the food immensely. Lirit was particularly intrigued by this insight, and pressed Pen for details. Bend suggested that they search the e-book library for some of these books, assuring Lirit that almost everything that had existed in several major libraries was included somewhere, and that they would probably be able to locate at least one of the books.

Theo pointed out that this was a good example of how children learn in the valley. "Something piques their interest, and they pursue it. If the new information seems intriguing, it probably won't be too long before the very stories that you mentioned become a fad, leading to discussions about whatever questions the stories prompt."

“I also remember,” she said, “That these stories tended to be somewhat racist and sexist—as well as dealing with topics you probably don’t want them exposed to, such as crime!”

“All the better,” said Theo. “We do not shelter these children from the realities experienced in the old world. This may provide a perfect opportunity to talk about such issues in a productive way.”

“Hmmm,” mused Pen. “The children in these stories were always intelligent, spunky, and resourceful, too, so perhaps they’d even have some other utility as well.”

As they stood looking over the valley, they could see a muted patchwork of color spreading out across the fields to the north and west. The “patches” consisted of small plots, a few acres each, interspersed with larger segments of the native landscape. Among the patches, what looked like irrigation canals glistened in the sunlight. “How does irrigation fit into your approach to farming?” she asked. “Doesn’t it create more problems than it solves?”

Bend acknowledged that problems could occur. “Which is why,” he said, “we minimize its use and shift the canals every few years in order to avoid concentrating salts or minerals in any particular plot. The ‘old’ history of this valley is laced with the necessity for irrigation, since so little rain falls, and since most of what water there was had been diverted to other places. People who live here have always had to irrigate; we just try to do it with as little permanent impact as possible. Besides, not many of the crops we grow need that much water. But our flax crops do need to be soaked in water during processing; having the water nearby helps reduce transportation needs, and allows harvesters to stay in the fields to enjoy the weather while they’re working. Linen, though, is only one of the fibers we use for clothing and paper, so we don’t need to grow large amounts.”

“What about dyes?” asked Pen, glancing at their own clothes and remarking on the subtle colors and patterns.

“They all come from common plantstuffs,” said Bend. “If you’ll notice, the colors all resemble the ones you see laid out in the valley: roses, sages, heathers, yellows, browns, some blue (from the old Medieval herb, woad). Many of the foods we eat produce good dyes—onions, nuts, grains, berries. Nobody around here ever composts an onion skin, it seems, because someone always needs it for a dye! And if a pressing of wine goes bad for any reason, it makes a terrific bluish-red; this doesn’t make the vintners happy, but I think the weavers secretly hope that a vat goes ‘off’ at least once in awhile.”

“Okay,” Pen ventured, “how do you decide how much of anything is enough? Enough clothes, enough wine, enough food, enough work, enough people? Doesn’t anyone ever decide that he or she needs more of something, or becomes acquisitive in some other way? Isn’t it part of human nature to want more of almost anything, like possessions, or wealth, or even knowledge?”

“It takes a great deal of thought,” Bend responded. “I guess that would suggest that we’re not very spontaneous, but that’s not really the case. People who work as hard as we do, and who play hard as well—there’s a midsummer festival in just a few days, after the lavender harvest—don’t seem to need to fill their homes with things that simply collect dust. ‘Enough’ for many of us would be indicated by ‘how much can I take care of?’ If something simply sits around in a corner, gathering dust, and gives no pleasure or has no use, it would be an example of ‘too much.’ Topsy, one of our ‘heroes,’ used to say that we should possess nothing that we don’t find beautiful or that isn’t useful. So that if we don’t really need something, or aren’t convinced of its utter beauty, we tend not to even want it. And we do tend to combine beauty and use; a bowl, a spoon, a chair, a garment—all these things, which we can certainly call needed, are created with craft. They’re designed to be functional and pleasing at the same

time; but they're also philosophically 'solid' because they're not made using destructive technologies or exploited labor.

“Even though, for us, ceramics represents a fairly sophisticated technology, the glazes are simple, and easily created from local minerals. Clay from the river, ancient hand-building techniques, and horse-dung and simple wood kilns provide us with what we need. But because each piece is created from scratch, often made by the people who intend to use it, it's valued, cared for, and respected—rather than hoarded or collected. 'Enough' dishes fill a cupboard in a home, or a shelf in a pub. When one breaks, it's recycled back into new ceramics. Not only does the inclusion of old pots help strengthen the clay body, but an old Native American tradition holds that it provides a spiritual and physical connection to the past as well. So the first plate a child makes, for example, can be ground up and re-used when it breaks, preserving the memory and the connection.

“Similarly, old clothing gets woven into rugs or used in paper-making, and since we don't build huge closets, people tend to obtain only what they need and can care for conveniently. We don't have a local dry-cleaning establishment to clean our clothes for us; everything is washed by hand after a few wearings, and hung out to dry. So folks have a few outer garments, some under things, socks, scarves, vests with pockets, and shoes or boots for various purposes.”

“I've noticed,” said Pen, “that there doesn't seem to be a rule about not decorating anything! I've seen embroidery and other kinds of embellishment all over peoples' clothes. And jewelry. And hats.”

Bend's own caftan was decorated around the neck with a length of embroidered material that didn't look particularly “native.” “It's from something my mother made when I was young,” he said. “I brought it with me and I've sewn it onto a couple of different things over the years. But that's part of what we do on long winters' nights when we get together for conversation, readings, or just

company. Almost everyone learns to accomplish simple sewing tasks, and many can weave, embroider, or even paint articles for themselves or others. You're right; there's no rule against decoration, but then there aren't any real 'rules' about anything. Nobody ever said that utility must be obtained at the cost of beauty; we want both." He grinned. "It's part of living with art," he said.

Pen smiled back, appreciating the gentle dig at her earlier assumptions. "Okay. So you adults were all committed to the purpose you set out to accomplish when you came here. But what about the children?" she asked. "Aren't kids by nature greedy and acquisitive? How do you keep them from wanting things just because their friends have them, needed or not?"

Theo said, with a laugh, "I'll take this one, since Lirit here is a walking museum." For her part, Lirit proudly patted her bulging pockets and smiled conspiratorially. "For one thing," he said, "we don't have Big Technology telling our children what they 'really' want, and we don't enroll them in 'boy farms' or 'factory schools' that teach them to be greedy little capitalists. All by itself, not having television has made it relatively simple to educate our children's desire for material things. And since they're not corralled into schools that remove them from adult company, they tend to learn by example. Since most of what they do acquire is stuff they pick up while exploring, they can always put it back when their pockets get full! As long as it's not something alive that needs to be returned to a particular habitat, treasures like rocks or shells can be put back almost anywhere in the valley—although they're more likely to be 'redistributed' in the form of gifts to their friends; here, gifts always 'move' in more ways than one. Once in awhile a child will want to acquire a collection of books or other objects, but when their space fills up, they're likely to decide later that they can live without whatever they're particularly keen on at the moment. Because the adults' lives don't revolve around acquiring more and more possessions, the children don't have negative models to overcome."

“So Lirit never whines about wanting a ribbon just like somebody else’s, just because somebody else has one?”

“Well,” said Theo, “if she really wanted one, she could find out how to make one; more likely, however, she’d figure out something equally wonderful to wear and try to inspire the friend to trade. As I mentioned about the books before, fads among kids around here sprout up continuously; but they have a half-life of about a week, because there are so many other things to occupy their time. During one recent harvest, just to give you one example, a couple of really little children, maybe three years old, started gathering sage brush bits. They tied them into crowns, and then began to stick bits of vegetable leaves and flowers in them. Even some of the parents got carried away by the latest ‘fashion.’ Within a day the fad had swept the village, and the ‘crowns’ got more and more elaborate until they started falling apart. But as they began to disintegrate, the kids automatically started picking up the bits, and sorting through them to decide where the bits would be recycled. The sheer work of it all contributed to several very quiet evenings when exhausted little ones went to bed early.”

By this time Pen was laughing so hard she announced that she needed a ‘rest.’ So she went with Lirit to a nearby stand of trees. Lirit asked Pen, “Don’t you have any children where you live?”

Pen had to think hard, trying to remember. “I don’t think so,” she said, “at least not of my own. Maybe that’s one of the questions we can answer later.”

When the two returned to the horses, the men were gone, so they sat on a rock near the little pond, the source of which seemed to come out of nowhere, several hundred feet above them on the mountainside. There sprouted a few sapling trees and short, dense stands of what looked like watercress. As she noticed this, she saw Theo climbing up toward the little oasis, where he picked a small bunch of the herbs and then rejoined them. Theo had carefully put his

find, which was indeed watercress, into a small container. “A gift,” he said, “for my wife—or perhaps for those who feed us lunch in Tinemaha.”

“This brings me back to what I was wondering earlier,” said Pen, “both about what constitutes ‘enough’ and how you decide who does what. Theo says people are going to feed us in Tinemaha. But what if someone doesn’t want to eat with everyone else, and what if someone wants to eat a lot more than his or her share?”

“It has to do with intent,” Bend offered. “We knew what we were in for when we came here, and we knew from our discussions that occupations would have to be fluid. Some people are good at some things, better at others, and probably hopeless at even more. But in the distant past, people had to acquire a variety of life skills—before industrialization led to highly specialized labor. Here we’re all capable of accomplishing basic tasks, and most of the limitations that emerge are physical, and often temporary. We’re a pretty strong, healthy lot because we almost all work in the fields, unless we’re incapacitated for some reason: age, injury, advanced pregnancy, infancy. But even small children learn to help out with planting, weeding, and harvesting. In the process they learn about growth, biology, co-operation, and pick up all sorts of practical skills.

“Old people, people recovering from injuries, and very pregnant women watch babies, tell stories, write, read, sew, weave, or help with less strenuous chores than fieldwork requires. But no one is *forced* to do anything; we all recognize what needs doing, and contribute toward accomplishing those needs. Beyond that, how much time we spend with one another is up to us, individually. If I’m out of sorts and don’t want to eat with anyone, I have a small solar cooker and a small wood stove—where Clara’s little guest, Wren, and I cooked breakfast yesterday—and I can get necessities from the commissary when I need them. Overindulgence isn’t usually a problem, because, once again, we’re not educated by outside forces to want more than we need. Occasionally a child

might want more of something sweet than is good for him or her, but if the desire is indulged once or twice, the child usually feels uncomfortable and doesn't repeat the request. If the child were to insist, discussion would ensue about why the indulgence will no longer be accommodated—along the lines of 'If you want another biscuit, you'll have to make it yourself'— but it rarely comes to that."

"And what's the 'commissary'—some kind of supply store?"

"Well, yes; 'store' in the sense of 'a place to hold things until they're needed.' We try to keep a supply of clothing and basic linens on hand, and essential nonperishable foodstuffs. Lots of canning gets done if a harvest is particularly plentiful. Most of the glass we made early on was precisely for that purpose; but we also preserve meat and grains, and store fruit like apples and pears and root vegetables in cellars where they can be held for long periods without more processing, or we dry them. The commissary also acts as a depot for recycling worn clothing and other materials. We have separate spaces for some of that kind of storage, and several separate libraries where people go to borrow or share books. Most people have small caches of books they especially love, or have written themselves, or are simply in the process of reading, but books circulate fairly frequently, and even the most avid book lovers here don't acquire more than they can comfortably store in a small room."

"That explains the little bookshelf in Clara's guestroom," said Pen. "But if you have to rely on 'necessities' in order to feed yourself, wouldn't that get boring after awhile? How much variety could there be if you have to depend on what's available at a particular moment, during a particular season?"

"I guess, that's one reason we like eating communally. With more people to cook and contribute ideas and effort to a meal, we get pretty creative. And, when you think about it, even someone like me, who lives alone—although, admittedly, 'alone' is fairly relative, since my room is adjacent to the

guesthouse, and Clara almost always has guests like Wren and Flint and their families—even an old loner can take advantage of the fresh eggs, bread, and greens made or gathered every day. When food is minimally processed, natural, wholesome, and flavorful, it’s also satisfying to more than just the appetite, and it doesn’t take much effort to prepare. So if I choose to eat by myself while I’m reading something particularly interesting, or if I just want to sit out and be quiet during a meal, I can. But if I want company, it’s always around, and I have a variety of places to go in order to satisfy needs for companionship. Sufficiency—just enough to satisfy—is fairly easy to come by.”

Pen noticed, as they sat against the warm rocks in the clear light, eating dried fruit and bread, and drinking fresh, clean water from the spring, that Bend’s sufficiency principle was being illustrated as they spoke. Companionship, conversation, sustenance, and the beauty of the landscape combined to provide her with a sense of just enough of what it would take to live well. As she visibly breathed in the scent of the high desert plants commingled with that of the river and the horses, Bend and Theo both smiled. “It works on a sensual plane as well,” said Theo. “Sight, smell, texture, sound—seldom are any of these obtrusive or offensive. No air pollution, no noisy machines, no artificial perfumes, none of the usual offenses brought about by human occupation of a natural space.”

Once again, however, Lirit had a comment: “I still don’t like skunk smell or cat poop,” she announced. They all chuckled, and Bend thought it probably signaled time to move on. So they gathered up their gear, again leaving little evidence of their occupation, and rode back toward the river and the path that lay beside it, indicating the way to Tinemaha.

