

## **A Matter of Priorities**

Jeremy was pacing up and down the aisle of electronic equipment at Sid's Premium Electronics. He just couldn't make up his mind about what to buy. He went into the store determined to purchase a top quality sound system for his living room. He had grown tired of his current system. Although it was only a year old, it had become obsolete in his eyes. He wanted all the latest features, especially the remote control options. Now that he was there, confronted by such a cornucopia of products, the choices seemed overwhelming to him. The prices ranged from eighty-nine dollars for the bottom of the line to nine hundred and seventy-nine dollars for the premier model with all the features one could ever imagine or hope for. They came in all colors, shapes and sizes as well. As soon as he made up his mind about one model, he found another that seemed even more appealing to him. The hours went by as he vacillated from one decision to the next. The beautiful spring day that might have beckoned him was waning as the hours wore on. Finally, he made his decision. He went with the medium priced model. Although his heart was set upon the most expensive, he could not justify the price. He waited on the end of a long line of customers with their prizes in hand. Cheryl, the checkout clerk, was an elderly woman who was obviously struggling with standing in one place for so long; nevertheless, she made a brave attempt at courtesy. Jeremy, however, barely noticed her, for in his mind he was still debating his decision. Although he had entered the store with the greatest of expectations, he found that as he was carrying his purchase to his car, he felt inexplicably depressed. He felt let down although he wasn't quite sure why. He had to navigate his package through a parking lot filled with people

coming and going: teenagers, mothers with their young children, young couples, families and people alone like himself.

The drive from the mall to his studio apartment was a short one, about ten minutes. He was somewhat distracted and could not seem to focus so that when he lingered at the stop light after it turned green, he was nearly catapulted out of his seat from the jarring sound of car horns voicing their collective displeasure behind him. By the time Jeremy got back to his apartment, he found himself in an unpleasant mood and shouted at his Siamese cat when he tried to rub against his leg. “Sam,” he shouted, “get out of my way!” Sam, of course, barely paid him any mind.

He spent the next few hours dismantling his old audio system and replacing it with the system he just purchased newly removed from its cocoon of plastic wrap and Styrofoam. He painstakingly connected all the cables, and when he was done, turned it on. He tested the volume by turning the sound level all the way up, and was satisfied. He put on his headphones and was completely immersed in the world of his music. The phone rang but he didn’t hear it. His brain relinquished all its concerns, its frustrations, its disappointments and gave itself to the rhythms that were relentlessly pouring into him. For those moments while he was “plugged in,” he was free of cares. Everything was right with the world and with his life. Ultimately, it was hunger, however, that pried him away from his sound system. As soon as he disconnected himself from his equipment, all the feelings that were suspended above him fell back into his consciousness with abandon. He once again was confronted with all of the concerns that he passionately tried to escape. He thought of Melissa, his girlfriend, and how she, in so many ways, was a stranger to him. He thought of his job working at the helpdesk for a company that

made video games depicting violence and mayhem, and how unsatisfied he was with that work. He could not sustain these thoughts for very long, and, remembering his hunger, he sought the solace of food.

He opened the refrigerator to find all the usual suspects: the half filled plastic container of milk almost sour, the left over slices of pizza unwrapped and not looking particularly appetizing, the block of cheddar cheese almost entirely covered with mold, cans of beer lined up on the shelf like soldiers prepared for battle and an open tin of tuna fish next to jars of ketchup, mayonnaise and mustard. Such was the bounty he saw before him. Needless to say, he was not enthused. He perfunctorily took out the can of tuna, the jar of mayonnaise and some stale white bread sitting on top of the refrigerator. As he was preparing a tuna fish sandwich, he glanced over at the telephone and noticed that he had a message waiting for him. He picked up the receiver, pressed the replay button on the answering machine and heard Melissa's voice.

“Hi sweetie, I just called to say hello. I'm just hanging out this evening and probably will be washing my hair; it really needs it. Give me a call if you have a chance. I would like to hear from you. Love you.” The voice dropped away as she hung up.

Jeremy loved Melissa, he was certain of that, but he was feeling down and really didn't want to talk to anyone, especially her. He began to pace up and down the confining perimeters of his apartment. As he often did when anxiety and uncertainty plagued him, his unsettled mind, like his feet, paced up and down the same neural circuitry. Thoughts came and went in waves. They were discontinuous thoughts illogical and imprecise yet they possessed a bizarre internal consistency. His train of thinking

could not lead him to any resolution or satisfactory conclusions. Such is the way of the troubled mind.

His body eventually grew weary of the worry, confusion and stress. He did not want to face that empty bed even though it was beckoning to him. He knew only too well that once he reclined in that bed, insomnia would overtake him. He had not had a decent night's sleep in weeks.

He was so tired of dealing with life without having enough sleep that he decided to self medicate. He came to depend on his old faithful drug: alcohol. He set the bottle of scotch on table next to his bed with his scotch glass. He turned on the television at the foot of his bed and began filling his glass and downing drink after drink; until, he began to grow sleepy. His strategy seemed to be working. He was watching the sports channel, and, as his senses began to dull, the figures on the huge screen TV became more and more indistinct. Eventually, he fell fast asleep right in the middle of an infomercial all about the benefits of liposuction. What Jeremy had not counted on was that his sleep would be invaded by a most unsettling dream.

The dream began with him in a huge house with many, many rooms. In each room the walls were bare and slanted. These rooms were connected by hallways that stretched as far as the eye could see. Jeremy frantically walked through these rooms apparently looking for something. He heard voices in the distance that were calling to him. But try as he may, all the rooms he entered were empty. As he moved farther and farther into the interior of the house, he could not find any exit. He entered a complex labyrinth from which there was no apparent escape. Panic soon took over and reached

such a crescendo that he began to scream. At this point he woke up and found himself unable to fall back asleep, but now for a different reason, for he became frightened that the dream might recur.

## Working for Pay

The next morning, Jeremy got up with a hangover. Even though he was already awake, he was startled by the alarm clock radio that was programmed to tune into a local nostalgic rock n' roll radio station that had the habit of cycling through the same songs over and over throughout the day. The songs were, in reality, filler for all the air time between commercials. Everything was for sale: pills for every occasion and malady, cars, petrochemical-based cosmetics of all kinds especially geared to both inspire and assuage adolescent anxieties of belonging and rejection, vacations, real estate, specialized training for the perpetually unemployed, on and on they went becoming a reality that droned incessantly in the background. Steve Clark, the local DJ, sounded like his conversation was propelled by a flood of adrenalin inundating his senses. Perhaps, if what he had to say was done loudly and quickly, it would blunt the pure inanity of the communication. At that moment, Steve was in the middle of an impassioned advertisement for home insulation. "If you're concerned about going through another cold winter season facing gigantic heating bills, now may be the time to insulate your home. The experts out at Stanley's Home Improvement right in the heart of downtown Seattle are ready to take your call. They will come out to your home and give you a free estimate. Just tell them that Steve sent you, and they'll take ten percent of your bill. Act now. This is a limited time offer. Now for our next oldie's tune: *Riders on the Storm* by the Doors."

Jeremy had no real interest in home insulation, but hearing the Doors at six o'clock in the morning had a stimulating effect on his nervous system. His morning routine was fixed and firmly established over many years of repeated behavior. Once he

arose, he put on his bathrobe and went directly to the kitchen to pour a cup of coffee from his automatic drip coffee maker. He micro waved the coffee for exactly one minute and forty-five seconds. He did not use the programmed time for beverage, for the coffee heated that long was too hot for him. With his coffee in hand, he went to the bathroom and started the shower. He waited until the water was just the right temperature before he went in. His shower generally took about six minutes. He didn't time his shower; he didn't need to. The movements he used were so precise and the time that he spent on each part of his body did not vary significantly from shower to shower.

Choosing the clothes he would wear was not much of an issue for Jeremy. He had a limited number of shirts and slacks and, therefore, only a small number of possible combinations. He did not have a strong sense of style, and did not have a good eye for color, which made him generally satisfied with his choices. As he got dressed, he studied his body in a full length mirror that hung in his bedroom. Jeremy stood about five feet nine inches tall. He was stoutly proportioned and a sizable paunch was blossoming around his abdomen. Like many men, he had flat and barely discernible buttocks. Every time Jeremy surveyed his proportions, he convinced himself he would start eating better and exercising more, and each time, he forgot this resolution about as quickly as he made it, in spite of the fact that Melissa had made frequent references to his weight.

For this day, Jeremy chose a bright yellow shirt with dark jeans and black and white tennis shoes with white socks. He donned his Seattle Mariner's baseball cap that he wore everywhere, a habit that tested Melissa's patience.

Jeremy lived in a townhouse apartment in Burien, Washington outside of Seattle. It was a working class neighborhood on a quiet street among many single family residences. He generally left his apartment for work at six forty-five in the morning.

His thoughts were chaotic. He thought of the rush hour traffic he would soon be facing. He thought of the job he was not looking forward to and all the petulant users dissatisfied with the product in some way or other. He thought of Melissa: all the things he liked about her, and all the things that gave him pause. He thought about himself and his own unquenched hungers and uncertainty. None of these thoughts, however, went anywhere. They were all incomplete and essentially unattended. The thoughts moved through him without any intervention on the part of the intellect.

His car was a bright red Miata: a car which he loved, but could barely afford. He unlocked the door remotely and walked around the car looking for any new scratches or dents. He was very protective of his vehicle; it had become an important part of his personal identity.

At that time in the morning, the drive North to Seattle was mostly uneventful. As soon as he got behind the wheel, he turned on the radio. Now that he was more fully awake, he no longer needed the frenetic voice of Steve Clark. Instead, he turned to talk radio. Many stations with this format had arisen in recent years due, in large part, due to the rise of a fierce patriotism that had engulfed the nation. Ever since the staggering attack and destruction of the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001, the country had become fearful: a state of mind that the government effectively exploited to implement its own agenda. In large part, the nation had been polarized into two opposing camps. On one side, the conservatives endorsed a policy of rabid militarism

seeing the world outside as essentially hostile. This world view encouraged building a fortress and espousing what was referred to as the American Empire. The other side saw the world not as black or white but as essentially gray and advocated a more reasoned approach to foreign policy. Most talk radio represented the fiercely conservative side. Jeremy had no political viewpoint of his own, but borrowed from the thoughts and attitudes of those who saw America as a bastion of good surrounded by evil. Jeremy did not read and had no body of knowledge to argue against the simplistic universe that was painted for him. He enjoyed the visceral response he felt when listening to the rabid pronouncements of his favorite talk show host, Mary Feels. In part, this good feeling came from the fact that she painted a simplistic picture of reality and provided a significant distraction from his frustrations and concerns.

In response to a caller's question about the "immigration problem," Mary responded. "If it was up to me, I'd put all those worthless immigrants back on a bus or plane and send them back to where they came from. They steal our jobs. They come here to rob us and then start looking for handouts. Now, to make matters worse, they are plotting to destroy our nation. We need to free ourselves of them. You all know what I'm talking about." Jeremy found himself vocally agreeing to these comments. "Right on!" he yelled out at one point.

When he arrived at work, he found himself in a familiar sea of cubicles. Fellow employees were arriving as he was. He sat down at his desk and put on his headset waiting for the first call of the day.

Cynthia arrived soon after and said, "Morning Jeremy!"

Jeremy nodded as he began to answer his first call. The unhappy user was having difficulty installing the software. Jeremy asked all the usual questions about the kind of operating system the user was running, whether or not anti-virus software was running in the background and what kind of error messages he was getting. He exercised every modicum of patience he could muster, for he knew that the call was probably being monitored by his outrageously overpaid supervisor, sitting in a very comfortable office.

The cubicles filled a huge open space in a room that had no windows. The constant murmur of what seemed like disembodied voices surrounded him as he worked. The employees were allowed two fifteen minute breaks during the day and a one-half hour lunch. In reality, Jeremy rarely had time during the day to take breaks, for the phone was constantly ringing. The reason for this was quite simple: the product had a lot of bugs. The company was marginally successful and was constantly pressuring developers to get the product to market before it was exhaustively tested. Jeremy had a degree in computer science. Although this was not the kind of work he aspired, it was a job that paid reasonably well. He routinely had lunch with Cynthia and Phil, who occupied neighboring cubicles. They often went to the company cafeteria located in the lobby of the building.

“You wouldn’t believe the idiot I had on the line this morning! When I asked her to restart her computer, she actually didn’t know what I was talking about. I actually had to help her find the control key,” Phil explained.

“Are you trying to tell me,” Cynthia interjected, “that as a woman she was a dolt?” Jeremy could tell that Cynthia was agitated. This was not unusual for her. He

noticed the muscles around her jaw below the ears, tighten. Jeremy enjoyed observing Cynthia; he found her terribly attractive. She was petite in stature with well delineated features. He was mostly attracted to her full expressive lips. He enjoyed watching her when she was angry. Cynthia had a low threshold when it came to accepting points of view other than her own.

“No, I’m not saying that,” Phil quickly retorted. “There you go again. The caller happened to be a woman that’s all. How else am I supposed to describe her: as an it?” Phil smirked. He was loving this. He knew Cynthia’s vulnerability and loved to bait her. It gave some meaning to his day, no matter how perverse. He was terribly bored with his job.

“I know you! You’re always ready to put women down. I know what you’re thinking.”

“Right!” was Phil’s reply. The pupils of his eyes were transformed into a narrow focus, and his features mirrored his feeling of growing indignation. Cynthia knew how to incite him as well.

“C’mon guys!” Jeremy said, “you’re giving me indigestion.”

Everyone suddenly grew quiet. They finished their lunch and soon were back at their cubicles. This kind of exchange was not unusual. It gave character and dimension to their day. Jeremy, however, was often disheartened by these disagreements; they intensified his feelings of loneliness and detachment.

That evening Jeremy had a particularly bad bout of insomnia. He was about to pour himself some spirits from a bottle, but decided against it. He was feeling so desperately lonely that he picked up the phone and called Melissa in spite of the hour.

“Hello, Melissa?”

“Jeremy is that you?”

“Yes”

“Do you realize that it’s one o’clock in the morning?”

“Sorry, babe, but I’m missing you so much, I just couldn’t sleep.”

“Well that’s sweet, but I do have to get up early this morning. You know that. What’s on your mind?”

“You should go back to sleep then,” he answered defensively.

“I’m up now. Why did you call?”

In reality, Jeremy had nothing to talk about. “I just wanted to tell you that I love you.”

“I love you too.” Melissa was confused. She wondered why he chose such a strange time to tell her, and over the telephone. After that brief exchange, they both became very quiet. Melissa finally broke the silence, “Look sweetheart, I really do have to go back to sleep. Why don’t you call me tomorrow. Okay?”

“Sure, sleep well.”

That conversation deepened Melissa’s doubts about his sincerity. It just didn’t seem genuine to her. After Jeremy hung up the phone, he realized it was a mistake calling her. He felt so helpless and ineffectual. Sleep ultimately took possession of him

nonetheless. During the night, he was revisited by an unsettling dream similar to the one he had before.

He was in the living room of a huge house with many rooms on three levels. Every room of the house was locked and he was unable to gain entry no matter how hard he tried. He heard what sounded like his own voice beckoning from a room on the upper level, "Jeremy, Jeremy come here." He ran up a flight of stairs and tried desperately to enter, hurling his body against the door, but to no avail. At this point he woke up.

The next morning, he went to work feeling terribly distraught and extremely tired. The day didn't go well for him; he was abrupt with his customers. Before he left for the day, he got a call from Ed Savage, his immediate supervisor.

"Jeremy, please come in and sit down," Ed said while motioning to Jeremy. "I've been monitoring your calls, and to be perfectly blunt, I was unhappy with what I heard." While Ed seemed imposing from behind his desk, when he stood up he was only five feet four inches tall. He was barely forty years old, yet he wore a hairpiece that was so terribly obvious that it spawned a rash of jokes among the staff. Ed compensated for his diminutive stature by being particularly brusque and authoritarian to those he exerted power over.

"How do you mean?" Jeremy asked.

"You damn well know what I'm talking about! You were abrupt to most callers and downright hostile to one in particular."

"Yea, I suppose you're right. It hasn't been a good day for me." Jeremy left an opening, hoping that he might evoke some sympathy and concern: that Ed would ask

what it was that was bothering him. He should have realized that it was a waste of energy on his part.

“Look Jeremy, your personal life is your business, but when you’re here, you’re expected to do the job you’re being paid for. I’m putting you on notice. I better see an improvement in your attitude. Is that understood?”

Jeremy nodded in agreement.

“Good. That’s all, you can go.”

“Fuck you!” Jeremy thought to himself as he left Ed’s office. “The little shit!”

That evening, he called Melissa and told her about his encounter with his supervisor.

“Well, that’s terrible,” she said her voice filled with compassion. “Do you want me to come over?”

“Would you?” he answered, clearly sounding needy.

“Of course, sweetie, I’ll be there in half an hour.”

He sat on the living room couch anxiously awaiting her arrival. He tried to think of what he would tell her, what he could say, and tried to convince himself that he loved her or that he was capable of loving anyone for that matter.

When Melissa entered his apartment, it was dark and she was inwardly appalled at how cluttered it was. It was obvious that Jeremy made no attempt to tidy up his place for her. Dirty clothes were strewn about, and the kitchen sink was filled with dishes, some obviously left for days. She questioned why she had bothered coming. It was but a fleeting thought, for she really did care for him.

As they sat on the couch in the front room watching the latest “survivor” television production showing twelve struggling actresses vying for a role on a major television soap opera, Melissa felt terribly perplexed. She was there to listen to him and help reassure him about what had happened at work. She was fully prepared to invest her emotional energy to help him through what she thought was a bad time. Instead, they were watching an escapist television show.

Suddenly, Jeremy leaned over and kissed her hard and full on the lips. It was a behavior so out of touch with the moment that she reflexively pulled herself back. She felt that she had been emotionally pushed over the edge.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, amazed.

“What’s the matter you ask me! I come over because I was concerned about how you are feeling; I come over because I was concerned about you. You haven’t said two words to me. We’re sitting here watching this idiotic show, and now you’re trying to put the move on me. Don’t you get it! What’s the matter with you?”

Jeremy became flustered. He felt like he had been tossed overboard in a tempestuous sea without a life jacket. He was certainly out of his element. She looked at him waiting for some semblance of understanding.

“I love you Melissa,” he blurted out.

A profound feeling of disappointment reverberated through Melissa’s nervous system. She had opened a door for him, and hoped he would go through. As a woman, she wanted a whole man: a man that could truly love her and trust enough to confide in her and let her love him with the full strength of her compassionate spirit. Melissa was seeking love in a world that had grown progressively one-dimensional and unfeeling.

She was hungry for a life's companion who would be willing to explore the inner reaches of the spirit with her. She was hungry for a love that knew no bounds. Melissa was a romantic in a human universe where every aspect of living had been distilled into a commercial venture of one form or another. Her sense of disillusionment went far deeper than Jeremy's state of mind; she was discouraged by the state of humanity itself.

"I'm not convinced that you love me. It's almost like I'm not even here. I think you're trying to escape from your feelings. What really makes me mad is the idea that you would use my body to do that! I'm really disgusted with you!"

Jeremy did not have a clue as to what she was talking about. He was truly drowning. His heart was racing and everything around him began to take on a dream like quality. He began to panic.

"But, I do love you."

"That may be," she answered, "but right now that's not enough for me. Jeremy, I'm not in a place to continue this conversation. I'm afraid of what I might say, so I think I'll be going home." As she said this, she arose from the couch, picked up her jacket and headed for the door.

He immediately stood up; "Please don't go, I need you right now."

"I don't think you do," she answered resolute in her determination to leave. "We'll talk later, all right?"

"Okay," he replied reluctantly, feeling horribly defeated.

"Goodnight," she said as she was leaving.

Jeremy was feeling far worse about his situation after she left than before she arrived. Insomnia had thoroughly taken hold of his nights and they became unbearably long. The chronic lack of sleep began making him generally irritable. He returned to using drink as his principle sedative. As soon as the alcohol made its insidious way through his system, a veil descended upon his negative emotions and, for a brief period of time, assuaged them. He somehow managed to maintain his equanimity at work and retained his job. His apartment became more and more chaotic as he abandoned any attempt to exert order over his surroundings. Although the refrigerator was often bare, he kept himself well supplied with alcohol. The television and his audio system occupied a central place within his fiefdom. There was never a moment of true silence in his apartment. Either the television was on, or the music was playing loudly and often both were going on at the same time.

Melissa became a convenient scapegoat for the state of his emotions. He found her guilty of being unsympathetic and unfeeling towards him. “She never loved me!” he convinced himself. He was the victim of an unscrupulous conniving woman. Like a sculptor, he was creating an awesome image of a woman in his own mind. His masterpiece was formidable, powerful and dangerous. She was alluring, yet repulsive, compassionate, yet manipulative, empathetic, yet self-serving. He molded all his own misgivings, doubts, uncertainties and fears into an awe inspiring and idealized vision that he defined as woman. He crucified himself with his own artful creation.

Jeremy was gradually and inexorably sinking into an abyss of loneliness and despair. He tried desperately to whitewash his emotions. His goal was to feel nothing. Any thought that might prove painful, he tried to obliterate with whatever medication he

could find whether that was alcohol, the meaningless banter of a late night talk show, the mesmerizing rhythms of music or the endless repetition of work. He became so adept at employing these diversions and especially that of work that he eventually got promoted to supervisor, a job that he quickly grew to despise.

Melissa waited for his call. To her, a call from him would be an indication of his true feelings. If he failed to call, she was prepared to let him go. She struggled desperately with these feelings. She cared for Jeremy like only a woman in love could, but she felt ill-equipped to take on the complexity of his torturous emotions.

