

Starting Over

They might be totally brilliant, but they really screwed up the plan to save the planet. First, if they wanted to pick a martyr, they should have picked one that was less of a wise-ass, or at least less inventive. Second, they should have known that theory and practice are different animals entirely. Finally, murder's a pretty bad way to start a new relationship. Life enjoys entropy, but resists any attempt at its own destruction.

From the lowest single celled organism to the most complex multidimensional ecosystem, living beings seek ways to survive and continue. Humans in particular aren't a static psychographic data set. We're dynamic creatures. We live. We love. We thirst and hunger and desire. And we fight.

We also have an innate ability to tell right from wrong.

Like I said, they're smart. They have impeccable credentials and deep resources. You've got one of the world's premier marketers, a top academic, a backroom advisor on three invasions and I'm not sure how many counter-insurgencies, top military psy-ops consultants, a slew of religious experts and a team of

ethnographers and sociologists, and a bunch of twenty-something mathematicians specializing in statistics and predictive analytics. That doesn't mean they're not desperate though.

They weren't at first. It was all planned and ordered and logical, and it seemed to be working. But, like a strain of bacteria that grows resistant to antibiotics, like a dieter that wakes up in the morning determined not to overindulge but is cajoled by a double chocolate doughnut by breakfast time, like a parishioner that grows deaf to the petitions of his preacher, we change. We adapt. So, it devolved, and now they want a high profile death as another log on the fire to keep it going.

Alicia knows that I'm not all that anxious to die yet, but that's almost beside the point. What she doesn't get is that another death might not help things out. It could make them worse. It's like she always said. It's a slippery slope from identifying patterns to stereotyping; if you generalize you're going to lose the customer. Plus, it's been done before. If you want somebody to think you don't care about them, just feed them the same old stuff you did last time.

Simply put, my piece of the puzzle was that they wanted to make me a new messiah; or a teacher, or an interpreter, or a leader,

or an icon, or a keeper of the faith, or an example. It all depends on what segment they're targeting.

Pronouns are important here. "A" and not "the." They did the research, and it makes a difference. No one meant blasphemy, or heresy. Quite the opposite. In fact, if you ask them, they didn't even make the decision. You did. But that's just a way to avoid responsibility. Blame it on the public.

Of course those in the know have the real story. It was merely a short cut, though no one would ever describe it that way. The comprehensive plan got curtailed in the name of improvement, but it was nothing but a reaction to budget overruns.

It wasn't supposed to happen exactly like this. Martyrdom is supposed to be voluntary, for one thing. The Powers That Be feel that we're two weeks behind schedule, like so much chocolate milk that's past its expiration date.

Also, messiahs should be seen in public to be believed, not hidden behind a computer screen.

They're massed in trucks and cars and armored personnel carriers outside the broadcast building, a heavily armed and highly

trained entry team waiting to bust down the doors to end it. But not like they think.

They can't kill someone with the whole world watching. I can't appear vulnerable, so I have a little breathing room. Because right now, I have the controls, and they know the building has its own self-sufficient power grid that they can't shut down, at least not without risking a portion of it being seen live before they get all the way inside. That would expose me as a fraud, and through me, them. They won't risk it yet.

Before long though, they'll get impatient. They'll debate the pros and cons. One of their geniuses will figure it out. Maybe they'll just kill me in front of the cameras and find an explanation for how it was foretold, like everything else. They're good at that - justification; rationalization. Someone will issue an order, even if it means killing the crowd too. What are a few thousand people to protect the world? Justifiable means. Casualties of peace. A drop of blood in a bucket of cleansing bleach. An offering to Man. **The many may serve the one, but the one may also serve the many.**

It will be a difficult decision, but not for me. I've already made mine, and what am I, but the product of a few decisions myself - decisions that could easily have gone a different way.

Believe it or not, the imminent threat to my life is the smaller problem that I face at the moment. The bigger one is that this whole plan is out of control. It was meant to bring the world together. Every trickle and stream and side creek of the world's religions and belief systems and cultures combining to form one mighty river of peace. Instead, we're looking at a sea of blood.

What starts as a breeze of change may develop into a mighty whirlwind.

To make it even worse, Lacey's here, and I'm going to have to deal with her sooner or later.

She turned out not to be anything like I thought, and nothing like her writing. I expected something more Gothic. A dark brooding vampire queen crossed with The Bride of Frankenstein, gnashing teeth bared in a maniacal bloodthirsty grin. Instead she's a tiny thing, strawberry blond hair covering freckled skin, and blue-grey eyes that are transparent pools of truth rather than burning torches of criticism and hate.

So, one more problem. I have to sort things out with our biggest critic. That's another reason that they've waited to come in. If I deal with her myself, maybe they won't need to take me out. That's how they think.

*It's tempting. She's a pain in the ass. But it wouldn't last. It might buy a week or two more, maybe even a month, but they'll be back. They **also** adapt. So I have to protect her too.*

No matter how much things change, the intent was always good. It was right. We tried to unite the world, at least a big chunk of it, and I used to think that it would actually work. In a way it has. We're united, but that unity has changed from a fever of passion to a fervor of hate. It's boiling now, and well past an argument over method. Now it's about how things will end.

When the end comes, it shall be like it was at the beginning.

That's a pretty good one, even if it is just off the top of my head. I had to memorize a list of over a hundred "Eternal Sayings." They used to feed them to me during the training phase, and every one of them was carefully crafted, and then translated inoffensively and inspiringly into hundreds of

languages. But that was before I went rogue, and started to spew wisdom of my own invention.

Save yourself. That was one of my best. But more about that later.

When it comes to wisdom, there's that thing I started with. I might not be able to tell any longer which thoughts are my own and which ones they've led me to, but I know right from wrong. Murder, well that's wrong, and it's not where we started.

The original plan was a grand and beautiful scheme, elegantly drawn up, with a peaceful and happy ending. But **a sword in its sheath maintains the aim of its master, but the naked blade seeks its own target.**

Oops. My bad. I'm not supposed to create military quotations. No references to battles or war or fighting. But what the hell. I'm the man. I mean, a man. I can say what I want, and they'll just twist it into what they want to hear anyway. And they don't necessarily object to all medieval references. Probably something about a heavy-handed central authority figure.

In their view, God doesn't create Man. Man creates God, or god, and in his own image, and even when He doesn't like the god that He's created, He still worships him and hangs on his every word, before He kills him, that is.

That's something that Lacey keeps harping on in her underground reports. She keeps asking, if I'm so real, where and when did I come from, and why have I done everything on-line, and why has it taken so long to let people see my face? She doesn't even think I'll do it now. She might be right.

She wants history, some deep dark secret. There isn't one. Of course I did the things that most kids do, and made my share of mistakes in my teens and twenties. Not that there's a trace left to find. They've erased it all, even the speeding tickets.

But Lacey's started to tear at the edge of the tapestry, and it's beginning to unravel. They're afraid that she'll find the truth. I was an unusual child because of my background, but ordinary in every other sense. I didn't have the grades to make med school, or become a lawyer, but I leveraged my practicality into a role as a consultant and a negotiator. Those pay enough now that I don't need to tend bar any more, but I do, because I like it.

They're even more afraid that she'll find the truth about the origins of our scheme. It wasn't a message from the modern prophets. I wasn't foretold. I was the product of a chance meeting in a smoky bar at the Hotel Internationale in Geneva, but only three people on the planet know those very beginnings. Only three. Alicia wasn't there at the outset. Frannie didn't bring her in until afterwards. I guess maybe it was four if you count Louis, but he's not talking, and neither will Frannie or Ned. Nope. It's up to me.

It all stemmed from a simple question. Frannie (Dr. Franz, who is not really a doctor, but likes to be called one, which is why I call him Frannie), asked Ned and me "Why do we fight?" The three of us argued over it until well past midnight.

We were drinking a bottle of Louie XIII, a hundred year old cognac that retails for about three grand in the states, and probably twice that in a fancy hotel bar in Switzerland. I was trying to figure out how Frannie paid for it. Not how he could afford it. I'm sure he earns a ton. But how do you submit an expense report when you ply your craft in the shadows and back

rooms? Is there some old biddie, Helga, who approves payment for a new Ferrari and a ski trip in the Alps?

I also wondered what he was getting at, and could tell Ned was speculating too. It's like that with Frannie. When your buddy is one of the world's leading advisors to generals and presidents and CEOs, with clients all over the globe, including the CIA, and probably MI6 and the remnants of the KGB and the Stasi, you question his ulterior motives.

The story is that Frannie lost a child to violence. His son fought in a desert somewhere, and got taken out by an IED. That sounds like great motivation for revenge, but not so much for peace. That's how he sold it to us though. Stop the fighting, and that stops the killing. Stop the killing, and no one else's child has to die. Ironic, given what was planned for Lacey.

Trouble is, with Frannie, you never know what's real and what's a story. Even then, I took it with a grain of salt, but I listened. The loss of a child is heart-wrenching, and we were close enough friends that I didn't want to chance being wrong.

That was his motivation, his son. I wasn't as sure about Ned. What drives most academics? Something to do with being smarter

than everybody else, or having insights that others don't, or seeking some kind of personal glory through being different, or being inherently vicarious? I'm not sure.

For me, at first, I thought it was something to do with being left alone all those times. A desire to be with people, to be in a group. A need to be part of something.

From my youth, when I invariably forgot my key to whatever housing we were calling home at the time, I'd find one of a dozen different ways in without one. It was like understanding the nature of the place, to know how to get in. I've broken in to a kitchen by slipping my fingers under the window screen and crawling through to stand on the table. I've manufactured all kinds of stories to convince neighbors to help. I've learned to pick every kind of lock.

Mom or Dad would walk in, and I'd have a pot of chili simmering on the stove, or fresh bread cooking. I'd have their favorite cocktails poured and waiting too. I did it enough times to grow proud of my own self-reliance. I got to enjoy it so much that I eventually stopped taking the key with me altogether.

Eventually though, moving from city to town to military base around the world, just picking a lock wasn't enough. I began to explore the neighborhoods, good and bad. I've learned six languages, bargained for spice in Madagascar and for jade in Hong Kong, and can mix over two hundred different local drinks while bantering with the customer or buyer or new acquaintance the whole time. That's the first reason they wanted me. I had exposure to lots of different people and environments.

That part was easy. It was natural for me to meet new people, and then interpret their cultures and norms. What's harder is not getting the crap beat out of you for being the weird new kid in town. That did happen a few times, but I progressed quickly there too.

After a few black eyes and bloody noses, I got the basics of fighting. What I found though was counter-intuitive. You could get a bully to stop picking on you by kicking him in the jewels, but he'd almost always come back with a big brother, or a posse of friends. I got stronger and faster, and learned to kick harder, but I had no posse of my own.

After escaping a knife fight in the Philippines with a foot long scratch across my sternum, I contemplated my own security were I

to remain on the path I was walking. Eventually, I found that establishing common ground and avoiding the fight was an even better way not to get hurt. That's a valuable skill if your mouth tends to shoot off before your brain is engaged.

There are levels of fighting. At the beginning, it's inaction. You don't even know you're at risk or being attacked until you're on your back on the ground. Then you get reactive. When the punch comes at your head, you block it, or duck. After a while reacting, you learn to attack at the same time as the other guy, and when you get even better, you attack first. But all those still lead to a fight, and somebody gets hurt. No matter how good you get, there's a larger than insignificant chance it could be you. If you really want to exercise that human inclination to survive, you get the other guy to like you and avoid fighting in the first place.

That's another reason they wanted me. I knew how to fight. More importantly, I knew how not to fight.

Which is just what Frannie was asking. "What causes man," he said, (not Man, at least not yet) "to take up arms against man? Is it hate, or envy, or lust? A desire for power? An innate bully that lives inside each of us?"

I know the answer now, but not then. It's one thing. It's fear. And not a generic all-encompassing fear, though it may manifest itself in many ways. No. It's a specific form of fear. It's fear of in consequence.

But I am getting ahead of myself again. It's time I mentioned the dream.

I'm not talking about a metaphorical dream like Martin Luther King had. I'm talking about an actual wake up in the middle of the night dream. I'm not even sure if the dream is why I said yes when they asked, or if they asked because of the dream, but it was the third reason, the real reason, that they wanted me.

Getting left alone and making dinner, knocking a price down to a fraction of its initial value, and avoiding a fight are all important. Developing a doctrine of self-reliance grew into the foundation of everything that came after. Maybe I shouldn't have told Frannie about it in the first place.

I had been to D.C. the prior week, to speak at a conference. My topic was how culture is reflected in local games and pastimes, and how you can adjust your negotiation style accordingly (ask me sometime about how you can tell where someone is from by how they play chess, and how I lost a C-note to a chess hustler at the MIT cafeteria because I didn't understand the local culture yet). But I still enjoy being a tourist, no matter where I go, so after lunch at an unprepossessing Ethiopian restaurant (where I convinced the owner to let me mix drinks for a couple of hours and talk to his customers), I ducked into the Air and Space Museum.

In a musty dark corner, many exhibits away from the *Spirit of St. Louis*, and three floors above the Skylab command module, there are a couple of plastic chairs and a dilapidated screen masquerading as a movie theater. It gets only a few visitors, and some of those are probably looking for the bathroom and take a wrong turn.

"*How Big is The Universe?*" doesn't appear very exciting, but if you want to know the true spark that ignited a new personalized way to market thought and religion, it wasn't a message from a burning bush, or a secret from a mountaintop. It was an ancient

loop of 8 millimeter film that had faded to the yellow jaundice of a week-old bruise.

The movie starts on the back of a hand. A scientist from what must be the 50s or 60s explains the power of ten, and then zooms in a factor to look at the skin on the hand. Then another factor of ten, and another, and another, down to the molecular level. The process is played in reverse, one multiplication per second, until the view is back at the hand, and then the yard, and then the planet, the solar system, and finally at the level of the Milky Way.

It's this second part that I dreamed of, fueled perhaps also by my having spent several hours with Louie's lowbrow cousin Jack (a whole bottle's worth). Most dreams are not just ephemeral, but dwell on the unimportant. The missed exam. Running in slow motion when your legs feel like lead. Showing up to class in your underwear. But that night, I dreamt big - big and euphoric. I was a hero. I had labored for years, and found it at last - the cure for cancer.

But in the midst of celebration, I found myself drifting outward from the banquet hall, up above the auditorium, above the school, the town, the lake, and eventually the planet. Up into

the solar system, and to the edges of the galaxy. What meaning had a cure for a deadly disease, even one that could save millions, when the cosmos was infinite? And I realized that my great discovery meant nothing, not when positioned against the vast indecipherable emptiness of space. I lost my sense of purpose, my sense of self, and my faith in man and God. I was alone in the wilderness, and believed that I could not have felt more isolated and afraid.

I was wrong. This initial insight was a single wave crashing on the beach, only introducing me to an immense ocean of insignificance. Recognizing how small we are compared to the universe is only one measure of our irrelevance. That we are one number among billions makes us trivial. But also, what if worlds exist that are much larger than ours - so large that we cannot perceive them? We are an atom, or a subatomic particle, compared to the beings above us. We don't even know that those larger worlds exist.

Also, what, I thought, if we are too big? Doesn't that also make us irrelevant? Could we mean nothing to some tiny world of microorganisms, and what if they are so small that we simply can't see them, or even measure them to know that they're there?

What if there are worlds that move faster than ours, so fast that we can't see them? Or too slow for us to spot? If time ticks by and one millisecond in another world is many lifetimes of ours?

What if something happened so far away that by the time it reaches us, we are dead and can't perceive it?

What of those men of ancient history? In my work, I've toured a lot of museums, and they all seem filled with crumbling statues honoring some long ago hero who won the battle of something-or-other, or discovered and claimed a land before it was ravaged by the generation that followed. What if something happened so long past that it means nothing to us today? What if it happens so far in the future that we mean nothing to it?

There was a field near the house we rented in the Baltics, left barren following a fire. When I stopped by on a visit several years later, it was a young forest. That was only the course of a couple of decades. How much more change and death and rebirth can occur over millennia?

What if there are sights, and sounds, and colors that exist, but that we can't perceive within the range of our eyes, or our ears?

What about luck? What if I make a decision to buy a stock, and it triples? Was I smart, or just lucky? Did my existence have any impact? What if Truman hadn't dropped the A-Bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Do we know if we'd be any worse off? Are we the product of some random event in the past, some butterfly effect? If Mom or Dad or Grandma or Grandpa had done one thing differently, would we even be here? We can only travel one path at a time, and that is one of millions that we could have chosen, but we will never have the knowledge of what could have happened.

Though a dream, this travel through the heavens went on for hours, each turn chipping away at my ego until finally, I stood at the precipice of despair, a great void in my heart. I stared into an abyss, and it extended forever in every dimension.

At this point of deepest hopelessness, I saw the light. There was a way out.

OK. We can't control things that happen or happened too far away, or are too small, or too big, or too long ago, or too far in the future, or just dumb luck. But what if we adjust our area of influence to that which we can perceive, and where we do have an impact? What if we turn the paradigm on its head? A cure for cancer may mean nothing in infinite space, but it means something to the world, and more to a country, or a town, or a family. It means everything to the parent of a small child that lives next door and that you've saved. If you shrink your universe to the size that you want, even removing a splinter may make a big difference.

This was my insight. The human brain seeks control and some sense of progress. You can choose to believe that your purview is infinite, and your life meaningless. Or, you can shrink your world to match the level where you have an impact.

When the high school star goes to college for the first time, perhaps they mean nothing in the larger universe of State U. If a star university athlete visits the pros, perhaps they mean nothing to the country. But when that same star athlete returns home, they are everything to their local town, and even more to Mom and Dad.

When a child in a remote village learns how to add, it may be trivial as compared with students in a developed country, but if it means that child will be the first in her family to leave the town and attend university, it may mean everything.

The converse is true is well. If you make a mistake, it looms large in the context of today, or your job, or the grade on your exam. But relative to the big picture, it means nothing.

With this view of controlling the zoom lens of introspection, we have the power to make ourselves infinitely important, or infinitely insignificant, depending on what answer we seek. In summary, god is within Man, and not some extrinsic force. We each must seek our relevance.

This was my answer to Frannie's question. "We fight to find relevance."

He sipped deeply on his cognac before he responded. "A doctrine of self-ascendancy" is how he described it. The individual has all the power. Shades of Nietzsche, without all of his self-destruction.

Now I know that Frannie couldn't have read my dreams, but I suspect that he was already beginning to adapt what I'd described to him to fit a plan, and a partner, that he'd already had in mind.

I might even have been the Beta test case. He probably had Alicia run the mapping and completion application on me, and it predicted how I'd react. The dream was just a fortunate verification.

For Ned also found elements of the plan attractive, and I know that Frannie had his number. Ever since the three of us had come together in Germany, Frannie had known exactly the right words to get Ned to agree. We'd even worked together to entice him to skip English and see what Oktoberfest was all about. Not much, it turned out. Bunch of foreigners paying too much for their *bier*, and singing "Ein Prosit" in broken German.

I think I enjoyed Germany more than any other place we lived, perhaps because we were there the longest, and maybe because it was one of the more challenging living quarters to break into,

but probably because it's where I met Frannie and Ned. The tourists could be obnoxious though.

I ended up buying some teenage British football hooligans a round to stop them from pounding Ned's face in. It worked, though later we saw them hauled away by the *polizei*, but only after having been pummeled by a Dortmund biker gang. After my initial round, Frannie had bought them one stein after another until they were throwing up on their shoes. I'm not sure how he got the gang involved, or manipulated the kids into insulting them, or how he pulled the cops in, but he could work motivations and connections even as a young teen.

I asked him about it. Why he had pushed the kids like that.

He didn't, he said. "I just let what was natural take its course. They were going to get into trouble anyway, and they were bullies, so why not let their behavior correct itself?"

"Why intervene at all?" I'd asked, thinking I had him outmaneuvered, and knowing that he had a soft spot for Ned. Surely, his protection of him was like mine, an interruption and aberration. If nature was meant to run its course, why not let Ned get beat up?

"That might have worked too," said Frannie, unfazed. But it's also natural to stick up for your friends. Plus, I had this.

He pulled a dull coin from his pocket.

"An old German Mark," he said, handing it to me to rub between my fingers. "Kaiser Wilhelm II on one side, and the German Eagle on the other. I flipped it."

I'm not sure why this particular flashback. Maybe because the Swiss bartender had taken our order in German, but maybe because when I think of Ned, I think of how Frannie pulled his strings.

Ned (who had three doctorates, but liked to be called Ned, so I called him Ned), alternating between sips of Louie and club soda, swallowed and disclaimed my idea to have potential.

Reminds me of "Let it Be," by the Beatles. Don't fight it. Just adjust your point of view.

For me, that's not quite right. The closest psychological term is more one of self-actualization.

"So if that's why we fight," said Frannie, "can we use it to stop ourselves from fighting? Just change your perspective so you're not insulted by the other guy, or so you don't feel inconsequential?" I'd love for everyone to adjust their lenses, but how do you expect the world to drop their prejudices and biases and just start believing that their wars are unimportant and that brushing their teeth or trimming their toenails means everything?"

And that is when Ned quoted Mark Twain. At least that's who he attributed it to, though I've never been able to confirm it, so expect he never said it. "The best way to get rid of a bad habit is to replace it with a good one." Given Ned's profession, accuracy isn't his strongest suit. He is a combination of professional philosopher, talk show host, and motivational speaker. Not really a con man though. He's not trying to put anything over on anybody. He genuinely believes his own stuff.

That, in turn, got me talking about the story of Daruma (or Bodhidharma in China). When I practiced Karate in Japan, one of my instructors told me this story to explain the origins of Eastern martial arts.

Daruma, a great philosopher, traveled thousands of miles over the Himalayas from India, barefoot, alone, with only his horse. When he reached China, he tried to teach his ascetic philosophy to the men that he met, by sitting in a cave and meditating. The rigor was too much for his new disciples however, who began to fall over from exhaustion, so he developed a system of facing gradually more difficult physical challenges. It came to be known as Gong Fu, or Kung Fu. By combining mental discipline with physical development, his students were at last able to make progress.

Give them an objective, learning how to fight, and from it, learn peace.

This again, was a version of the insight that led to the birth of Pax Nova. Of course, we had to argue to get there, and once Alicia joined, the concept mutated into something else entirely.

I can see and hear them on the monitors. I should say I can see but not hear them. There's an eerie quiet, the quiet that means planning and anticipation and an imminent attack.

The trucks appear to be askew, but in reality are lined up to protect those behind them. The leaves on the trees rustle gently, as if they were meant as background noise for a picnic, and not about to be interrupted by the blaze of bullets flying, or choked by tear gas. The grass waves gently in the breeze, a subtle susurrations masking the intent of the armed and dangerous.

There is a tension in the air, almost like the ozone that precedes a rainstorm. They are coming, and soon.

There were three alternatives that we wrestled with. The first was military, not surprising given who some of Frannie's friends were. They wanted to get rid of something like half a billion people, more from some countries and backgrounds than others, and somehow that would bring us closer together. It had legs for a while, until the general espousing it had a heart attack while in bed with a stripper. Frannie said it was just the general following his natural predilections. I suspected Frannie might have known the stripper.

It wasn't hard after that for Frannie to talk them out of that one. To listen to him, it was strictly a logical argument. I

suspect that he may not have been driven solely by human compassion. I think he just didn't want it because the other options allowed more manipulation. Either way, he saved a lot of lives.

Next was Ned's alien invasion option. Everybody laughed when he first brought it up, but the more we talked it over, the more reasonable it became.

Ned's version was based on fighting a common enemy. If the planet were invaded, then we'd all get together to resist. It was a well enough worn plot that people might find it believable. In a world of CGI, it might not have been that hard to convince multitudes that we were under attack.

Once again though, it was a solution based on violence. A lot of us would have had to die to make it believable, and a few big buildings would have had to have come down.

Ned liked it, and argued hard for it, but was convinced to go with our third choice, partly because it was elegant, partly because it let us play God, partly because of the corollaries it had to an alien invasion, and eventually because Frannie convinced Ned that it was his idea.

We decided to establish a new religion, though the name was old. Pax Nova was what we called it ourselves, though it's known by many different names depending on the audience. It meant new peace, and we would bring the world together.

That was the idea. The seed. But to get something to grow you need to nurture it, to provide light and water.

Well Frannie, with all of his connections, tended it like a Kansas factory farm, replete with the fertilizer. A team of specialists refined the concept, and figured out how to communicate it with credibility, to get buy-in the world over.

The challenges though, were substantial. There are so many differences across the world's religions that finding a common thread, one that's strong enough, was nearly impossible. We can get most of the planet on Facebook or to use Google, but religious views and practices are diverse.

Is there one God, or many, or none? Do we seek everlasting life, or freedom from the penance of life? Should we aspire to a

future, or suffer the burden of our pasts? Do we exercise our own will, or seek a guiding hand?

And that's before all the details about what to eat or not eat, or how to dress, or what words to use with one another.

Frannie's resources were extensive, but every time they worked up an answer that solved one problem, another one popped up.

Then, he found Alicia.

It took a while before Frannie told me just how he had recruited her from a top paying role in Silicon Valley. That story was told in a moment of weakness, and is not for today.

She was tall, with dark auburn hair, and poly-ethnic. Her skin and hair and lips could have come from any of a number of backgrounds. Physically, her eyes were what grabbed you the most. They were deep, dark, penetrating, boundless. But it was something about her mind, her force of presence, her will, that made your knees buckle. We all fell for her a little.

Despite her beauty, and her brains, in the end she was loathsome. We all came to despise her a little too, and some to

despise her a lot. Certainly she came to despise us, and wanted us all dead.

She'd come from one of those internet stores that sold shoes and handbags and scarves, and claimed that you could sell anything to anyone if you knew the right message. It was all a matter of data, and adapting the pitch to the person.

She started marketing sneakers at \$350 a pop, sometimes 3 or 4 pairs at a time, to kids who just happened to have enough in the bank to buy them. That wasn't hard. She looked at parents' credit scores and what kind of cars they owned. Then pitched the kids on the sneakers, and the parents on other things a spoiled teenager would buy.

She sold gym memberships to young women and girls that had just been through a break-up, predicting it through their on-line searches and purchases (jewelry to repair the ego, and a new picture frame to replace the broken one?). Well, that, and borrowing profile information from internet dating sites.

She did well in healthcare for a while, but got caught up in some kind of privacy violation. Had gotten very good at predicting whether middle aged men using statins to reduce cholesterol were likely to live or not, and tried selling the information to insurance companies as empirical data. That worked pretty well until the head of the FDA, who was on the target list, answered an ad for a male enhancement supplement, and it never showed up. They traced ownership back to a sub that Alicia had set up in Jersey City, using the source data as a mailing list. In swept the Feds, and Alicia was hauled off in handcuffs.

Frannie, friends with a number of high-ranking government officials, got her sprung the next morning, but on the condition that she work for him.

He employed her initially on global political consulting. In short order, she managed to get multiple municipal and a few federal candidates elected or appointed, both in the states and abroad. She had a near perfect track record, but left a trail of innuendo behind that put her at risk again.

Frannie moved her to predicting military equipment needs, which in turn morphed into anticipating conflict hot spots around the

world. That's probably what caused Frannie to pull her into our efforts.

Her breakthrough for us was along those same lines of personalization, and elegant in its simplicity. It solved the problem by flipping it on its head. Instead of finding one common set of beliefs to fit everyone, tailor the message to beliefs and predilections that people already have.

The SWAT team moves rapidly, in two by two cover formation, from behind the forward-most of the trucks. I count twenty helmeted figures in total. They drape weaponry over their jackets, so that I can barely see the word 'Polizei' poking through from underneath.

How strange that the building they are rushing is here, where I spent so much of my time growing up.

Alicia's brain trust has found their solution already, much more quickly than I had expected. A synthesized version of my voice, the same one that I had used for my radio-style broadcasts, loops a message on computers and televisions around the world,

again in multiple languages, with the broadcast building in the background behind a caption that says "Live - Munich, Germany."

"He will at last be revealed (I guess a messiah/teacher/interpreter is supposed to refer to himself in the third person). He is inside the building on your screen, and being held hostage by his enemy, known only by her screen name, Lacey. Do not fear for him. As you can see, our protective force is approaching, and they and God will protect him."

Alicia and Ned hated each other from when they first met. It was probably Ned's behavior, but it might have been that he found out about Alicia's past through one of his buddies in the New York or Massachusetts state insurance departments.

On the surface, what divided them was a difference in approach. Ned was endlessly inventive and creative, but in the end theoretical to the point of dreamy. Alicia was hard and practical. If it didn't result in a sale, whether of merchandise or an idea, she didn't want to hear about it.

Beneath the surface, it was something else. Something simpler and more elemental. Jealousy.

Part of Frannie's ability to manipulate was his charm. People followed him like hungry puppies, and he made you feel like you were the only person in the world.

Until Alicia came along, Ned was a plaything for Frannie. Sometimes it was a small thing, like getting Ned to order the Cajun shrimp off the menu, even though he didn't like seafood or spicy dishes, or talking him into picking us up in his VW Vanagon half an hour before the poetry lecture ended, or nudging him into sacrificing his bishop for two pawns on the chessboard. Other times it was getting Ned to expound on one of his theories so that Frannie could poke holes in it.

It was a symbiosis. Frannie had a chance to practice his craft. Ned complained, but secretly enjoyed the attention. Maybe he was being manipulated, but at least someone cared enough about him to play the game. It irked Alicia to no end.

"I think I make her a little crazy," Ned used to speculate, "but I don't know why."

"She was crazy to start with, Ned." But we couldn't put a finger on it at the time.

Did Alicia think the time Frannie spent on Ned a waste of his talents? Did she want Frannie's attention directed all at her? No, it wasn't that type of envy.

I remain convinced that she wanted to be able to control Ned just like Frannie could, and found herself lacking when she couldn't. She thought that Frannie wanted all the same things she did. Success certainly, and fame (at least within the corridors of government), and fortune. More important to her though, power. Dominance. Influence over another.

Frannie liked manipulation, but not for power. Not for control or dominance. He did it out of enjoyment. It was intellectually challenging. And it was fun.

Ned seemed impervious to Alicia's influence. The two of them worked together reluctantly despite their differences, but it was hard to watch. They set up the basic tenets. They tested hypotheses and positions. They found advocates. They tied it in to local religions. They promulgated and promoted, on television, over the internet, through word of mouth. They

planned it, and executed.

They fought the whole time though.

Alicia wanted the entire plan to be web-based. Ned wanted a stronger element of personal involvement. Alicia wanted to sell religious trinkets and make a profit on the side to offset costs. Ned found that unconscionable. Alicia wanted to allow practices to continue that much of the world would find repulsive, because maintaining those practices tailored the results to the individual. Ned wanted to eliminate them altogether.

The thing they agreed on was the one that finally drove them apart, threatened Ned's life, and is threatening my own demise.

They wanted a messiah.

Ned wanted one because he liked big, dramatic answers.

Ostensibly, Alicia wanted one because we were running short on funds, and even with her powers of persuasion and Frannie's, we didn't have enough budgeted to pursue marketing at the individual level.

So they agreed.

The bickering was what initially turned Alicia against Ned. What turned Alicia against me was my mouth.

I refused to use the sayings that she crafted exactly as written. That incensed her.

I couldn't though. I could tell what she and the team had written wouldn't work.

It wasn't difficult. My global ground level experience had provided a sense of what would pacify folks, and what would engender their animosity. What she provided me to write and say was the latter.

Then one evening I came into the lab, as we called it, after a long day of training.

Alicia was there, tottering, drunk from some sort of celebration. She slithered toward me, twirled my hair with her

fingers, leaned forward to amplify her cleavage, and hinted at a kiss, somehow without pursing her lips.

I've talked or moved or bought my way out of more tough situations than I can count, and I could have easily defused this one without angering her. But pride overtook me, and resentment on behalf of Ned.

So instead of an amicable laugh and departure, I found myself with one hand pressed against a stinging cheek, as she stomped out the door.

In her haste, she left behind her a small clutch. I thought briefly about dropping it in a waste bin for the night crew, but brought it into her office and pulled a drawer open to leave it inside.

Two pieces of paper rested in the slide-out. The first was a fax, with a foreign military insignia on the top. Under the header of "In re, your communication of earlier today," was the single phrase "All terms agreed."

I could tell this meant something, but not exactly what.

I soon forgot about it as I read the second note. It was my script for the next day, neatly typewritten and exactly with the words I would have used, but with handwritten notes in the margin that were clearly Alicia's, and that dramatically adjusted the effect.

I was fuming myself, and stomped out just as Alicia had.

Ned had envisioned a lengthy search process for someone as important as a savior for almost half the planet. If we were going to go this route, we needed to do it right, and big. Alicia suggested an easier way. Just use me.

Ned would have none of it. He thought it was too dangerous, and must have seen even then that all messiahs become martyrs.

Alicia and Frannie marketed it to me, playing off my own personal preferences. What better way was there to exert oneself within a sphere of influence than to lead the way for hundreds of millions of followers? Wouldn't I like to ply the skill that I'd so often used for peace in a Malaysian bar or on the streets of Mumbai on a wider scale?

It wasn't even a contest. I bought in almost immediately. I would wear the robe of conscience, to rid the world of hate and violence.

Save yourself.

Ned was not usually one prone to loud argument, but this issue ignited him, despite my agreement to go along with Alicia. The arguments between the two intensified, shouting, screaming, slamming an old dial-up telephone down on the desk.

They each asked Frannie to intervene, but he wouldn't. He just watched things take their natural course. What finally broke things open was that damned coffee cup.

Alicia had brought the mug with her from one of her trips to China. She claimed that it said "True Mandarin High Queen," or something similar, and thought it a mark of her acceptance into Chinese society. I knew enough to understand that it was a bit tongue in cheek, and meant that she was a classic elitist, a snob, a bureaucrat. Another interpretation was simply "important female duck."

Regardless, she displayed the mug proudly on her desk, along with clay statues from the Forbidden City, and lacquered chopsticks.

Ned, in the midst of a screaming match with Alicia, smashed it onto the floor and sent dozens of small Chinese pebbles scattering.

I've seen Alicia explode many times. I had never seen her completely quiet until that incident. She turned to stone, her eyes two glaring embers of coal. She stepped into Frannie's office to wait for his return. When he got back, they closed the door for over an hour.

Her exit was as quiet as her entrance, and this time she glided rather than stomped away.

Once I acquiesced, Ned stopped fighting it, and worked harder than ever on getting it right.

Everything fit the design of the dream, and it started to succeed, awesomely so. It grew incredibly quickly. There were armistices signed, and anti-nuke accords, and land-sharing agreements. All within the first two years.

Even the pope lent his support at one point (in exchange for reinforcement of his papal authority), along with an ayatollah and the Dalai Lama.

There was a problem though.

As it started to manifest, it twisted. It was supposed to be about making the big small and the small big, but they made the small big and the big bigger. They overdid it.

I think it ties back to the Heisenberg principle. The act of measuring something in and of itself changes the outcome. If you actively interfere, the impact is even worse. Anything you do to mess with nature may have an unexpected side effect.

You come up with an antibiotic, and the bacteria mutate to resist it. You save a herd of deer somewhere, and next thing you know, all the trees are dying because the deer strip them clean. You drop interest rates to stimulate the economy, and borrowers

that have no financial wherewithal suddenly end up owning a home, but with a mortgage that puts them underwater when the economy goes south.

Our well-thought out plan had the same issues. It created rather than stopped arguing, or perhaps merely re-routed it. The dominant inherent force is so strong that whatever man does is twisted to His own ends anyway.

Jonathan Swift's Lilliputians warred with neighboring Blefuscu over which end of an egg to break. To Lemuel Gulliver, stranded oversized visitor, the disagreement was trivial. To the miniature humans that fought the war, it was intensely meaningful.

So it was with our plan. Individual analytics brought people together, but then they argued over what time of day to pray, and whether it was okay to eat pigs or cows, or which way to face, or what kind of car to drive to minimize a global carbon footprint.

So we took the short cut. We built prophets. We predicted a savior, and then built one to your exact specifications. And it made it worse.

We took away the individuality and lumped people together. We somehow emptied people's control of their own lives, and as we took it away, they looked to control others to gauge their own progress. Humanity turned freedom on its head, and misused what could have saved them.

Lacey fed the fire, and thereby fueled the anger, though not in the way expected. She also antagonized Alicia, and that put a target on her back like the one on Ned's and mine.

Lacey argued that I was no true messiah, that I was just another human, which of course was true. That provoked the crowd. The more they came together in my defense, the more violent they became as they fought over whose messiah I was, and what my mysterious phrases meant.

I think what got Alicia though was not that Lacey was on the trail of discovery. It was that she execrated "whatever half-brained assortment of idiots" put this plan together in the first place, and asked to meet to discuss it.

Lacey angered Alicia for the same reason that Ned and I did. She refused to be manipulated, and she made Alicia question her own significance.

Plus, she was bold. Instead of just attacking from behind a computer screen, she walked in and argued face to face.

When Alicia gave me the ultimatum, it wasn't even a surprise. It was so plain and bold-faced that I knew even before she asked it what she had talked with Frannie about, and the dilemma that she was going to put me in. Yet even seeing it coming, and how it would play on my emotions, I knew that I had no real choice.

She left me the option. She needed a martyr, a death to fuel the fire. I could pick Ned, or I could pick Lacey. She knew I would pick neither - that I would instead elect myself.

The resolution on the monitors is exceptional, as is the sound quality. The glass breaks in beautiful fractal spider webs that look like ice crystallizing, and the whish, boom, hiss of the

tear gas canisters is as loud and clear as if we were there in the room with Frannie and Alicia.

Lacey and Ned and I are enraptured by how smoothly the SWAT team executes their ballet of incursion. They swing in four at a time from the left, another four from the right, four more from the roof, some sliding down ropes, others rolling and tumbling and landing again on their feet.

I can't count the number of guns pointed at Alicia. I can count the one she points at Frannie's head.

If I didn't know her better, I wouldn't be able to see the almost imperceptible surprise. She had thought she was watching the troops surround me, and Lacey. She had given the final command to break in. She had built up the anticipation around the world that when they did, they'd find the new Messiah inside.

Frannie whispers to her, so quietly as to be inaudible, and I can't even see his lips move behind her auburn hair. There is complete silence then like the trees outside before the troops advanced. Next thing we can tell, a portion of Frannie's head is

decorating the wall, and Alicia is declaiming herself the Messiah.

The well-trained police team does not hesitate. They fire simultaneously at Alicia, a chorus of shots and echoes, and she bounces like a rag doll and falls to the ground.

She lies in pieces on the floor, having attained her martyrdom at last. Blood pools, and runs across the tile.

They did rationalize it all, just as expected. Frannie was the messiah that had been hidden behind the computer screen all that time. Alicia was Lacey. They sent one additional synthesized recording that had apparently been my last writing. All of the followers were to stop the violence, and find peace within themselves.

I thought back on my discussion with Frannie. After Alicia had stepped out of his office, I waited for a few hours for everyone else to leave, and stopped in. We opened a bottle of Louis that he kept in the Spanish style oak cabinet behind his desk, and talked.

He hinted at what Alicia was going to do, but I didn't need his help on that part. What did surprise me was that he had researched her activities and found how bad she had gotten.

She wanted a martyr because she'd made arms deals around the world. She'd been skimming off the top for years, and a martyrdom would fan the flames. Fighting would intensify, and profits would increase.

It was his idea to let her own greed destroy her. He'd accompany her to the broadcast headquarters, and I'd remain half a mile down the street with Ned and Lacey, pretending to be in the same place. He'd keep the mike live, and get her to confess.

What he didn't tell me was any plan to let her kill him.

We sit around a table in the back of the restaurant, eating, and dissecting what happened. Somehow, Ned found Cajun shrimp, or something approximating it, in a Munich Rathaus.

"Why do you think he did it?" asked Lacey. "Why not just let her confess?"

It might have been that he was worried that even jailed, she'd find a way out and do it again. It might have been that he didn't want another death on his conscience.

What it really was though is that she tried to manipulate him.

It wasn't until afterwards that we found out that he had set it up so that his friends in the German police would tell everyone that the dead man was me, and that Alicia had killed me. That Alicia and Lacey were one and the same, and that her long history of crimes and plagiarisms and maneuverings would be released. That Ned, and Lacey, and I could all go our separate ways without ever having to worry about being identified.

For Ned, it would be to go back to saving the planet.

"We can adjust the alien invasion story. See, they left us here millennia ago as an experiment. They were brilliant in their design."

"If they were so smart," says Lacey, "why did they make us so imperfect?"

"They made us fragile on purpose," says Ned, "so we'd have a desire to stay alive, and sustain the species. We have to fight to survive."

Lacey remains doubtful. "I don't know. Is there any hope for the human race as long as we fight?"

Ned responds that the only hope we have is that we do fight. We fight, and we protect others, and we seek peace, all to perpetuate the species.

For centuries, man has argued between free will and determinism. Do we carve our own paths from the wood of the world, or does the world cleave us to its own purpose?

Maybe we did interfere with the universe by trying to help it with a martyr. I knew creating an artificial one through murder is wrong.

Is it our nature to fight, or to seek peace? To improve ourselves by competing with and surpassing others, or by collaborating with them?

In the end, I changed my mind. The philosophy of individualism - all about the self - does not work completely. The only way to achieve individual ascendancy is by sublimating our own self interest.

It's like superstitions. Some people believe if you find a penny, pick it up. Others that you only pick it up if it's showing heads. Otherwise it's bad luck. For me, the answer's simpler.

It's good luck if you want it. Choose the belief that propels you. Make the rules fit your situation. You don't have to do it the way that they want you to.

Will any one of us survive or not? Maybe. Maybe not. Does it matter? That depends on you. Save one life at a time, or two, or a billion. It will matter to someone.

I think back to the image of the blood from Frannie's shattered skull running across the tile of the broadcast room floor.

It surrounds a single round object, metal, but no longer shiny. I don't know from here if it is showing the head of Kaiser

Wilhelm or the feathers of an eagle, but I know the edge is embossed with the words "GOTT MIT UNS," German for God with us.

Save yourself, yes. But save someone else.