

A New Story

by James Lynn Smith

To Edward, the idea was disturbing. Something was reading his mind, but the reverse wasn't true. He had been horribly depressed, yet the esoteric support group was not helping. The philosophical answers had as many problems as solutions. So here he was, once again, standing on the railing of the bridge, looking at the cold, swirling waters below.

He thought of his recent encounter with the group: The leader, Michael Banghoff, spoke in calm tones, but, so far, his messages spread in Ed's mind like a dark fog, obscuring any hope of finding peace.

"Just wait," the leader had said. "You're only glimpsing the surface; there is more to realize before climbing above your despair. We must harvest the fruits of inner growth to find the *new* story for your life." When Ed asked if those fruits were so-called "enlightenment," Michael smiled and told him understanding would come later.

The leader asked the group to not refer to him as "guru" or "therapist" for he was merely an instrument of their self-learning.

"What did I expect to learn?" Ed asked himself under his breath. "He's probably equivalent to a Swami, but doesn't wear a turban or rely much on eastern terminology." Ed was first drawn to the group by Michael's perspective. He appeared thoughtful and unusually familiar with science and philosophy, not dogma. But that perspective included Ed's mind being sensed by an entity he didn't understand, which was unsettling. *Maybe Michael's a quack. If so, he's convincing. Hearing him talk makes me want to accept it all, like a kid wants*

candy. But then it turns bitter.

The pain and emptiness in his life had driven him to the brink of leaping from this bridge once before. Only a last-minute vestige of hope made him wait this time. *Try the group just a little longer. If it doesn't work, I end it—right here.* He felt a momentary lift, convinced the eddies and dark rushing waters below would end the torture chamber his mind had become.

*

Driving home, Ed remembered his previous life, but his current mental state masked any perception of feelings. Happiness from a successful career as a financial advisor and life with a wife and two children came to an abrupt end with a freakish traffic accident while on their vacation. A truck came barreling toward them from an oncoming lane, causing Ed to veer off the mountainous road, turn over, and crash into a rocky embankment. He was the only survivor. Both feelings of grief and guilt plagued him. Though he was not at fault, he still felt responsible. *What could I have done differently? Was there a defensive maneuver I could have taken?* Being a man of confidence and self-control, it was impossible to accept the outcome. He eventually worked through the aftermath—shock, grief, funeral arrangements, insurance details—but never again felt the same assurance that life was worthwhile. If great things can happen, so can tragedy. *Is life just a crapshoot?*

Previous years of financial success and hard busywork allowed him to retire early. Then the impact of the prior tragedy recurred with full force. Yet it was bigger, more existential. *Are desired things mere lures for the cruel joke life plays later?* He was aware his thoughts were bleak and he needed help, but if the essential truth about life were dire, conventional therapy would not work. Hence, his gravitation to the unusual group he had joined.

*

The next evening Ed entered the meeting late and sat in the corner.

Michael nodded and continued his discourse. “Live creatures are mere parts of a greater whole. While we may think we are independent, isolated mind-beings existing inside our skulls, in truth we are parts of a greater soul. Of course, we are individual in our own dimension of consciousness, but once we shed all that makes us unique, there is unity of consciousness. Some practitioners of meditation claim to have discovered that place within.”

A hand went up and was acknowledged. “Does that mean I can learn to read someone else’s mind, even without cues like body language, expressions and prior knowledge of them?”

“Not necessarily, because thoughts in the mind of another individual are in a dimension different from yours. It’s only when you can eliminate all thought unique to yourself that it’s possible to be in the same consciousness. Most of us fall asleep attempting this level of meditation.” He smiled and looked around.

There were a few chuckles in the room after which someone asked, “What good is it to have this shared consciousness if it’s without thoughts?”

Michael raised his brows. “It’s not exactly blank. It has much meaning, but it’s more universal, not specific to any particular thought on a human level. Few attain that state. Jiddu Krishnamurti has said he could become aware of pure being, without thoughts, while fully awake.

Ed winced. *I want to know if life is worth living, not mind tricks or levels of consciousness.*

A female voice in the front row asked, “Dr. Banghoff, is mindreading related to this state of awareness at all?”

Ed straightened up to see her. *That’s what I want to know.*

Michael hesitated. “A broader perspective can ensue from that level of consciousness, yes. But I doubt specific information is exchanged. That may be

another mechanism, one unfortunately fraught with confusion.”

“But at the last meeting, you discussed a super-awareness which is conscious of everyone’s mind. Isn’t that mindreading?”

“Ah, now I understand your question. It’s a pantheistic concept that God is in *everything*, and thus is aware of all things, thoughts or otherwise. A similar concept is that all things we know are *in* God, but God may be even more. That’s panentheism.”

Ed whispered to himself, “Now comes the answer, or else a confusing load of malarkey.”

“With these concepts,” Mike continued, “each aware individual is a different ‘sense organ’ to the collective entity. To avoid confusion with our traditional religious beliefs, let’s call this entity the Supreme Deva. Deva is aware of existence through these individuals, each a unique dimension of sensory experience. They are not aware of each other, except through external interaction, but their minds exist in Deva.”

Waving his hand, Ed caught Michael’s attention and asked, “How can everything be one consciousness to Deva and a multitude of independent, different minds among individuals? Isn’t that contradictory?”

“Individual’s minds exist in lower dimensions, but Deva is a higher dimensional entity. Consider a box with height, width and depth. On a one-dimensional level these directions are absolutely different. However on a three-dimensional level, the volume dimensionality, all directions are part of the whole. Deva is like the box volume, but much greater. Individual minds are like the different directions, limited in scope.

Ed cupped his chin in his fingers. *So it’s Deva reading my mind, but I can’t even know that for sure.*

“I see some doubt,” Michael said, and smiled. “We are merely talking about

concepts here. None of it can be proved scientifically. It's something to ponder when your viewpoint seems clogged with painful pseudo-certainties."

*

The meeting over, Ed stepped outside and noticed the woman who asked the question earlier. She smiled, nodded, and began walking away.

Then she stopped, turned around, and said, "Your question to Michael was a nice sequel to mine. Sometimes Michael refers to the different perceptions of our multiple sense organs as unique dimensions. Other times, he talks about the box analogy."

"You've been coming here for a while?"

"A bit longer than you. It's not exactly therapy, but it helps get the mind off personal obsessions."

Ed noticed her long, chestnut hair and light brown eyes. Even from his state of mind, he felt a boost that an attractive woman cared what he thought. "My obsession has escaped Pandora's box and put a damper on everything. I can't even explain what the problem is anymore."

She tilted her head with a sympathetic smile. "I walk home from here, usually, and pass a coffee shop about two blocks down. Would you care to stop there with me?"

She's direct, likely attracted to guys she wants to fix. Or...maybe this is a setup. Preying on down and out guys and sharing the gains with Michael. Looking downward, Ed said, "Maybe some other—" He stopped mid-sentence. *What's wrong with me?* Then, "Thanks, why not?"

He decided to come back for his car later. For now he walked with her. "My name's Edward Brown. Ed is fine."

"I'm Karen Roper. Good to meet you." After they had gone a block, she said, "You told me you couldn't explain your problem 'anymore.' That implies

there was a starting event. Is this something you can talk about?”

He hesitated. *Another round of probing the wound.* “I suppose so, maybe after we have some java. It’s a drudgery. How about you? What ‘obsession’ drove you into the group?”

“Not so much ‘driven’ to the group as having heard Michael speak at my book club. He’s written two books, somewhere between self-help and philosophy. The man’s convinced that understanding the universal issues in mythology and finding the common ground in religions can enable us to live in a much healthier way.”

Ed pushed the coffee shop door open and let Karen pass. After being seated they ordered. Ed was the first to speak. He told of the accident, the impact it had on his life at the time, and the return of despair after his retirement. “I don’t know why gloom seems to have covered everything. Even if life is a fraud, there should be times when we can forget our trouble.”

“It must be painful to feel that way,” she said.

When their coffee came, Ed prompted, “And how about you?”

“My obsession: Pouring over a tragic mistake I made once. A decision I’m not proud of. In my college years, I was a bit on the wild side: dope, needles, parties. Compensation for having loving but overly strict parents.

“My sister Judy was two years younger, and somewhat frail. I convinced her to run off to Mexico with me, and she reluctantly agreed. I wanted to get out where life was in the raw. So it wasn’t just Cancun or Cozumel, even Chichen Itza and other Myan ruins, but way out in the bush. The guides drove us to less known ruins and, of course, I had to explore. I pulled my sister along and, as luck would have it, she fell down some stone steps. Judy had a bad head injury with lots of bleeding. The nearest medical facility was in a rural village. A medical aide there said she needed to be transferred to a hospital, noting that she had already lost a significant

amount of blood.

“At the moment, no blood was available at the primitive medical camp. The aide said they had enough plasma to keep her stable, but, feeling brave and courageous, I told him to take my blood; it was the same type. It was difficult for him to agree, because he felt sure the plasma was sufficient and didn’t want to take blood from someone without evidence of correct type, nor a good way to test for pathogens. I was insistent and he finally gave her my blood. The guides and I got her to a city hospital. But after stitches, concussion recovery, and healing, Judy began to decline again.

“When both of us were back in the US, I started feeling bad too. Turned out, some time earlier, I had been exposed to hepatitis C and now my blood had infected her. Long story short, even with little medication, I recovered. But my more delicate sister died. Mom and Dad were devastated. It seemed unreal. With the best of intentions, I had murdered my sister with careless bravado. I went into a long decline, couldn’t focus or hold a job. The freedom and confidence of adulthood crashed and I became dependent on my folks again.”

“You seemed to have recovered,” Ed said.

“Yes, became employed again and even sent money home during my parents’ decline and eventual passing. But the scar is still there. Life is serious now. I’m not the go-girl I used to be.”

Ed smiled. “Couldn’t prove that by me.”

“Listen, when I spoke to you back there after the meeting, I was scared to death you’d brush me off. That’s how fragile I’ve become.”

“But you still pushed through. I respect that.”

“Michael’s group is helping me. I’m realizing that because a person is coming to terms with some awful issue, they don’t have to hold their breath and shut the door on pleasure. I think you’ll come to see that too.”

He paused in thought, then said, “I’m confused on one thing. At the meeting there was talk about all individual minds being a part of Deva which knows them, but they can’t know each other in the same way because they are all lower dimensions. Why should we give a flip what Deva is aware of if we are stuck in our own little dimensions?”

Her mouth opened for a moment before speaking. “In fact, there *is* a type of sharing inner awareness with others. Though the dimensions of thought are individualistic and unique, they all originate from the same point. Imagine Michael’s ‘box’ where different sides meet in the corner, the origin point. Small region, but it represents the juxtaposition of all awareness.”

“And we get to that point how? Let me guess...meditation.”

She raised her brows and waved to an imaginary audience. “Give this boy a gold star. Clearing the mind may seem to be a void, but in fact it’s joining a common awareness with the whole.”

“Seems the cacophony of all minds would be like white noise, or a waterfall rushing downward. I’ve never heard it. I’m not a good subject for meditation anyhow.”

Karen laughed. “Neither am I, but it’s an interesting concept. Good to know there’s something else to try when in a funk. Michael says the best way to clear the mind is to face your obsessions, make decisions and take action. Once it’s underway, you feel more at peace.

“Like the mother who started MADD after her child was killed by a drunk driver.”

“Yes, that’s the idea. Exploit the power of your demon nemesis; don’t try to overcome it. Having a purpose is an antidote to depression.”

Ed glanced upward and rubbed his chin. “And...purpose is tied to a notion of who you are.”

“True, our illustrious leader hit it on the head when he said many moods and attitudes derive from the story you accept for who you are. Often we need a new story for our identity in order to heal. Not the bare facts themselves, but the implications of those facts.”

*

For the next few weeks, Ed and Karen discussed the group meetings at the coffee shop and another nearby cafe. It was evident to both that a problematic involvement was developing between them. One night Ed took a sip of coffee and carefully placed it back on the table. Karen appeared apprehensive, seeing the serious look on his face.

“Karen, I’m beginning to have feelings for you. I think you might feel the same, but I don’t know if I can handle it. I’m too messed up for a relationship with anyone. You boost my mood a great deal. I think about you a lot, what we might do, and where we might go, but I feel guilty, in advance, for failing you. I’d like to cut unpleasant connections from the past, but it’s not happening.”

Her forehead lined with disappointment. “I do feel something for you, Ed, and I’d like to help you cut those cords of gloom from your personal tragedy.”

“I’m damaged goods; it’s more than what happened, it’s who I am. And it puts me under more stress, thinking I’d only let you down. You need someone who can get his face off the floor for more than a little while.”

She merely sat, looking at him for what seemed a long time, then said, “I think there’s more hope than you realize, but I’m a big girl, and my feelings are not your responsibility. We’re just friends, then. Okay?”

“Yes, definitely,” Ed said. He had been thinking the release of obligation to improve himself would bring a sense of relief. Yet it didn’t.

*

Karen worked as bookkeeper in a small music shop. Though she rebelled

against the piano during her first two years of college, her parents had insisted on her playing when she was still at home and taking lessons during her senior college year. Now, decades later, she worked hard to rekindle that talent and, for supplementary income, became a private piano teacher.

Two of her students were scheduled to go with her and perform in a recital on a Sunday evening. Their parents were delayed on returning from a trip and would come later. That afternoon Karen's car wouldn't start. The timing couldn't be worse. She had to leave soon.

Ed's phone rang. "Hello, this is Ed," he said.

"It's Karen. I hope you aren't too busy, 'cause I've got a problem. My car's on the blink and I need to get two girls to a recital this evening. Would you be able to drive us there?"

"When do you need to leave?"

"In twenty minutes. I hate to bother you."

"No, it's okay. You'd do the same for me. I'll be there in about fifteen minutes."

When Ed drove up in front of Karen's house, she and the two girls were already standing outside. Lowering the front window, he said, "Taxi?"

Doors opened and his passengers climbed in, girls in the back and Karen in the front passenger seat. She turned to him. "Ed, this is Marie and Janice"

"Hi, girls. Big night, huh? I know you'll do well. You've got a good teacher." He waited for doors to close. "Buckle up gang. Which way, Karen?"

"Take us west on Route 34A. The recital's at a church. I'll let you know when we get near."

*

After 15 minutes, Ed became quiet when he recognized the route they were taking was the one on which the fatal accident occurred thirteen years ago. His

wife had been where Karen sat and his children were in the back like the two girls. The similarity was eerie, as though fate was forcing him to relive the past.

The highway began to incline upwards as they came upon the first in a chain of foothills bisecting the east and west side of the city. In the past he and his family had lived in a suburb farther to the east, and drove through this area on their first day of vacation. Trucks zooming by were big rigs hauling commercial freight. Their passing caused a noticeable whoosh of air pressure against the car.

Karen pulled out her cell phone to make a call and dropped it. “Darn,” she said, “it went forward on the floorboard.” She tried to bend over and reach it, but the seatbelt restrained her. “I’m going to loosen this for a minute to get my phone.”

“Make sure you buckle up again,” Ed said.

In places, construction had cut through rock on both sides of the road, leaving embankments above the road just beyond the drainage trenches. Ahead, the right embankment was higher than the left as the road curved to the right. Thus it was impossible to see the oncoming traffic until it was close. Ed became more attentive. *Is this the spot?* He tightened his grip on the steering wheel.

Up ahead, an oncoming truck came around the curve, at first appearing to be in his own lane. Then the truck drifted into Ed’s lane, headed for a full impact. “Not again!” he shouted and twisted the steering wheel to the right.

Like the slam of a gate, time instantly slowed to a crawl. He was retracing his exact movements in the fatal accident years ago in slow motion. Ed wrenched the steering wheel to the left, opposite the prior maneuver. The left margin of the highway approached rapidly and disappeared as his car plummeted into a deep ditch. He felt a dizzying swirl of movement and several thumps as the trench bottom zoomed toward him.

*

There was a flash of light, then darkness. He was aware, but didn’t know

where he was nor where he had been, merely that it was different. With vision adjusting to the darkness, he realized there was a dim illumination coming from one direction. As he moved, a series of images, smells and sensations passed through his mind. *Strange, I can only move along one direction, forward or back.* With each motion, different thoughts arose.

Looking downward toward the place his hands and feet should be, he saw nothing. Then he realized. *This whole path is... my mind.* He sensed some kind of burden, something that needed to be moved, lifted. Advancing toward the darkness brought mundane thoughts: brushing teeth, reading the paper, cleaning dishes, and feeling of an unnamed onus. Turning toward the dim light brought a faint sensation of hope. Progression toward the glow revealed the floor of his path to be painted with images from his life: his university graduation, meeting his wife-to-be, picnicking with her with her in the park, holding his first child wrapped in a soft blanket...

The closer he came to the illumination, the brighter it appeared. He was emerging from a dark miasma toward something different. Here more of the environment was visible, and his path appeared to be along an inner edge of a gigantic box with similar routes along the other edges. Those other lanes were also painted with thought images. Two were perpendicular to his, approaching the same corner, where a diffuse light source shone brightly. Wispy, diaphanous shapes, similar to his own, moved along the other paths toward the same destiny.

The light before him now had meaning. *The origin point.* Moving into its brilliance, he sensed the number of box dimensions increasing far beyond three and providing an astounding clarity of purpose he'd never known.

*

Ed felt something dripping from his face onto what seemed to be a fabric. Opening his eyes, he saw the deflated airbag in front of him draped over the

steering wheel. Confused for only a moment, he spun around and saw the dazed girls safely strapped in and mumbling in confusion. The car had apparently rolled completely over and landed wheels down. *Airbags and belts saved us.* He turned to check on Karen but only saw an open door. *Did she get out first, or...?* He then remembered her unstrapping the seatbelt to reach for her dropped cell phone. “You girls stay put. I’ve got to find Karen.”

Climbing out, Ed reached for his handkerchief and dabbed the cut on his forehead. *Don’t think it’s bad.* The sun had descended below the cloud bank on the horizon, limiting visibility. He ran around the car noting that it was aimed downward into a ditch with the front impacted against the other side, a rocky embankment. The ditch was filling with water from a culvert farther up. Feeling alarm at not seeing her, he called out, “Karen.”

Hearing the urgency in his tone, the girls disregarded instructions and climbed out of the car.

Ed thought he heard a moan. “Was that one of you?” he asked the girls.

They shook their heads and began looking around.

Then he saw her, lying supine in reeds and mud. Her lower left leg was caught underneath the back part of the car’s passenger side atop a stone that jammed her leg against the chassis undercarriage. The water level was up to her legs but her head and chest were farther back up the ditch incline. Ed dropped to her side, close to her face. “Can you hear me, Karen?”

She trembled. “Cold...It hurts.”

“We’ll get you out. Girls,” he shouted, “look for a cell phone and call 9-1-1. Ed thought of lifting the back edge of the car and having the girls pull her out. He squatted and reached under the rocker panel and strained upward with all his might. After a loud grunt, he stopped. *No way, too heavy.*

The water level had risen to Karen’s waist, and, if he couldn’t get her out,

she would drown while he watched. His legs trembled and sweat beaded on his forehead, mixing with the blood from his wound. *God, I can't live through this.* Then an absurd image popped into his mind. He saw himself at the group, explaining what happened and...

A strange, calm feeling brushed over him. *Something needs lifting, and there is an answer.* Without knowing why, he followed an impulse to climb up the roadside embankment toward the culvert gushing into the ditch. There beside the culvert was a slender, seven-foot, steel, I-beam, probably left over from construction or having fallen from a passing truck. The beam was heavy, but Ed grabbed it and slid with it back down to the car.

One of the girls on the opposite side of the car shouted, "I found my cell and have 9-1-1 on the line. Where are we?"

Ed yelled back the location information and pushed the end of the beam under the car two feet. He moved back to the other end and tugged upward on the beam as hard as he could. The car's edge lifted a few inches. "Now come pull her out, quickly," he barked.

The two girls rushed to Karen, grabbed her under her arms and pulled backwards, freeing her from the fatal trap.

Ed dropped the beam, and the car collapsed to its former position, water now over the front doors. He saw Karen's pale face, realizing she was in shock. Her lower leg was mangled.

He opened the car's trunk and found a furniture cover blanket and piece of rope. *First time my trunk trash has proven useful.* Pulling Karen to a drier place, he covered her shoulders and chest, then tied a tourniquet around her knee.

Ed sat beside her until he heard the siren and saw Paramedics coming down the trench. Then he pleaded to ride with her to the hospital. The girls were taken in a separate ambulance, examined, found unharmed, and soon released.

*

Karen's left leg was amputated just under her knee. Weeks of basic care were followed by a regimen of rehab, planned for months to come. In spite of the long road ahead, she had the determination to master the use of crutches and more, to walk again. Ed came to see her every day and eventually they were able to talk about the accident on a deeper level.

In bed, after an ordeal with a temporary artificial limb, Karen sat upright and looked at him. "You believe something inexplicable happened just after the accident, before you came to?"

"Yes, I do. When I was frantic to find something to tilt the car with, a strange, knowing confidence flowed over me, like I'd recently been exposed to pure genius. That feeling reflected back to the moment of the accident, but I can't remember any details about it."

"Too bad; if you did, we might start a group like Michael's." She smiled faintly.

He took a deep breath. "I think one Michael is enough. I'd rather spend the time with you and let the universe go unexplained."

"It takes courage to live without certainties, Ed."

"Maybe a sense of purpose fills that gap. Mine is to get you well and on your f...foot."

Her eyes welled with tears as peals of laughter burst from her. "Don't be so weird, it hurts to laugh."

"I'm serious. I've been concerned and anxious for you, sure, but I've not had one moment of gloom or depression since our accident."

She looked away for a moment. "Ed, you're sweet, but be careful. I don't have enough insurance to cover all my future expenses. It's going to be a long journey for me."

“I’ll be there with you. I can get a job again.”

“How will you introduce me to people? ‘Here’s my friend. I feel sorry for her because she’s missing her lower leg.’”

No, I’ll say, ‘Here’s my fiancé and, if you don’t like it, I’ll have her kick you in the butt with her prosthesis.’”

She chuckled and then stopped abruptly. “Your fiancé? Ring and all?”

“Yes, if you’ll have it, and then we can make the pact permanent if we both stay sane.” He leaned closer and kissed her lightly on the lips.

Karen’s eyes were damp and sparkling as a smile of delight spread across her face. Then with mock seriousness she said, “On one condition, buddy. You have to say at least one crazy thing a day so the humor will ward off evil spirits.”

He shrugged. “It’ll be a new story. Living with a gal who explored the Yucatan bush and then joined a group of weirdoes who talk about multiple dimensions, I don’t think that’ll be so hard.”

More Short Stories & Readers’ Theater Scripts at
Storylandscapes.net