

THOUGHTAUDIO



IN THE SHADE BENEATH A WILLOW TREE

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WRITTEN BY
TRAVIS JAMES KEYES

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MORNING

THE humble prophet Zesia was meditating in the shade beneath a willow tree when a sparrow flew to his side. Nature flocks to Zesia in this way, as he is tender to all living things, and they know he means them no harm, and by his side they are safe from Evil.

Zesia queried the bird thus:

“Confess to me, sparrow. I know that you and your kind have been around long before me and my kind, so you must have been there to witness my creation. I wonder, when the force that spun me to life did such spinning, was any responsibility placed upon me? Perhaps the force that spun the gift of life into mankind also spun into him a duty of restitution, as most gifts are given with the expectation of reciprocity. Resolve my doubt, sparrow; what responsibility is required of me in exchange for my breath?”

The sparrow was silent.

“My feathered friend, I do not know what to make of your silence. Perhaps you are sincere in your silence and say nothing because the force that spun me to life required nothing. Having required nothing, there is nothing to say; or so is one interpretation.

“But say you are not sincere. Suppose you know the answer to my question, yet wish that it remain with you alone. If this is true, I’m sure you have a good reason for keeping it secret, so I will not condemn you.

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“Yet you make me wonder, mysterious bird, which of these is the case. Actually, I have been wondering this for quite some time and can bear it no longer. So now I will extract the Truth from you, with or without your cooperation.

“Because Truth is like a caterpillar hidden under a leaf; sooner or later, it will crawl out and be revealed. I’m sure that you, eater of caterpillars, await this revelation so you may have your feast. Just as you await the revelation of caterpillars, I await the revelation of Truth, because what feast is more nourishing than Truth?”

Again, the sparrow was silent.

“I take your silence to mean, ‘Nothing is more nourishing than Truth.’ So, time and time again, silent sparrow, you answer that there is nothing by saying nothing.

“Still I wonder, but how I wish my wonder would cease! For wonder is a childish thing wrought of ignorance. Yet, as sure as dawn matures into day, wonder matures into wisdom; so soon, Truth will rise like the morning sun and be concealed no longer.

“Winged creature, I asked you: what is my responsibility? But since you refuse to answer me, I must get to the bottom of it myself.”

Zesia gazed deep into the sparrow.

“Sparrow, you have been around longer than most and have witnessed many creatures born into this world. During their birth, you overheard the responsibility instructed to them. After witnessing this many times, you thought, ‘I am no exceptional animal, so if this responsibility was instructed to every other living thing, I assume it was also instructed to me.’ Thus you have learned your responsibility.

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“But in my infancy, I was unable to comprehend such instructions; still my responsibility holds. What injustice! You know both my responsibility and also yours, but I know neither of the two. And since mankind is the youngest of all the animals, I have yet to witness the creation of a new form of life and learn my responsibility as you have learned yours, and shame! For you would leave me in the darkness of ignorance.

“But I have watched you closely, flying beast, and studied your ways well, so I know what you are thinking. And you think, ‘But, Zesia, how can you be certain that mankind is the youngest of all the animals? Perhaps some new form of life was created after mankind, but grew so fast that now it appears older.’

“Very well, sprightly bird. But I have proof that mankind is the youngest animal, and this is my evidence:

“When the great Pharaohs of Egypt decided to build their pyramids, so in death their bodies could occupy them as tombs, they knew that developing such a project from their imagination into this world would require a builder. And because their project was so grand in scale, they required many builders. And it was so.

“Many builders undertook the task of constructing the pyramids to serve as royal tombs. But before all else, the builders had to lay down a sturdy foundation; only then could they build on top of it. From this simple fact, three Truths are found.

“One Truth is that, *the oldest stone of a pyramid was the first stone placed, and the youngest was the last*, as there can be no other way. Another Truth is that, *the first stone placed was doomed to be the lowest, and the last was destined to be the highest*, because, again, there is no other way. The third Truth is that, *the lowest stone is the simplest stone, and the highest is the most sophisticated*.

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“By this I mean, the lowest stone is rugged and close to the earth, while the highest stone is the ornament of all stones and the most beautiful, impressive display. Because by the time the ultimate stone was placed, the builders were well practiced, so it represents the fruit of their most skilled craftsmanship and the celebration of their accomplishment.

“Thus, my ancient friend, the lowest and simplest is the oldest, and the highest and most sophisticated is the youngest. So much for pyramids of stone; what about the pyramid of life?

“Of all living things on the pyramid of life, mankind has the highest understanding and the most sophisticated mind. This proves he is the youngest. And the oldest is the plant, because plants have no mind. And although plants are rugged and close to the earth, they serve as the foundation that supports all life. Wouldn't you agree?”

The sparrow was silent, but the prophet reached into the animal's thoughts.

“I watch your mind, sparrow, and see what your imagination holds. You do not believe that plants support all life because you could survive on caterpillars alone. And although you enjoy eating seeds and forging your home in the treetops, you could do without these luxuries. You even imagine living on the ground, like your cousin the ostrich. Oh, Sparrow! How foolish you are not to think beyond your own kind. At least now I know my responsibility does not expand past mankind, as you are very familiar with this responsibility and still you think only of birds. I will keep this in mind.

“But allow me to explain how all living things rely on this mindless kingdom of green. All forms of life are predator to something else; all except for the plant. Plants prey only upon light from the sun, water from the clouds, air from the sky, and soil from the earth. As for the rest of us, we must hunt other forms of life. And the life we hunt must be simpler

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than our own kind. You wouldn't eat your fellow companions, would you, bird? No. You prefer to eat caterpillars. And caterpillars eat leaves.

“So without plants, caterpillars would have no food and would die. And without caterpillars, you would have no food, so you would die, too. Thus, although plants are rugged and close to the earth, they are the foundation upon which all life depends.

“This reminds me of drawing water from a fountain with a jug. Since all jugs must be filled drop by drop, before the jug can have much water, first it must have little. Now you might say, ‘This is not always the case, Zesia, because the jug may be immersed at once and fill instantly, not drop by drop.’ Yet, my aerial disputant, although it seems that much water rushed in suddenly and was there before the little water, this rushing only happened quicker than your eye could follow; still there was little before there was much.

“The same goes for the wisdom of man, as not all men are equal in wisdom. Just as the bottom of each stone in a pyramid is lower than the top and the top higher than the bottom, although mankind is one stone, he is divided into the simple and the wise.

“And those who are wise have much, while those who are simple have little. And because little precedes much, simple precedes wise. That is to say, wisdom is not an inherent virtue; everything is born simple and can only become wise through the attainment of Truth.

“But what does this say about my responsibility? Speak now, if ever, sparrow.”

The sparrow was silent.

“I see you are at a loss for words, and perhaps you cannot recall your responsibility at the moment. But I have observed you well, little sparrow, and know how you have been spending your time. I know you think only of yourself half the time and of your hatchlings the other half. I also know you are the wise and your hatchlings the simple; as they have yet

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to open their eyes and see the day, let alone learn to fly. Still, you furnish them with what they need, and tend to their hunger, and look out for their safety.

“So your responsibility is not only to yourself, but also to the simple of your kind. This is also true for the simple and wise of mankind.

“But then what should I do when a simple man comes begging to me in the street, him having little and me having much? If I help him unconditionally, he would pester me to no end for more help, but it won’t do any good because he will grow lazy and dependent on others, while I grow poor and lose my mind. Then both of us will have little.

“So I still do not know my responsibility and must dig further, as I have yet to get to the bottom of it.”

At this, the sparrow became uneasy.

“But why are you anxious, sparrow? Now you think, ‘Oh, Zesia! You already found your responsibility. Having extracted it without my cooperation, you said it yourself: your responsibility is to yourself and the simple of your kind. But now you wish to dig further. Do you not understand the meaning of your words? If what you say is true and mankind is the wisest of all the animals, and the youngest of all the creatures, then shame! For I believe you do understand the meaning of your words, Zesia, yet you set out to trick me away from that which I already know.’

“Please do not think that I am trying to trick you, suspicious sparrow. True, I said your responsibility is to yourself and the simple of your kind, but that is not the responsibility itself; that is merely to whom the responsibility is owed. I only meant that I would continue investigating until I uncover the entire Truth and understand my responsibility in full.

“As I was saying, I have watched you closely, sparrow, and studied your ways well. I often see you gathering food for your hatchlings to satiate their hunger. But if your help has

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no end, they will grow lazy and dependent on others. To prevent this, your help decreases with time, like the noon sun that has only downward to go.

“This prepares the simple to be self-sufficient. That way, they won’t rely solely on others when they encounter a problem. Thus, help must transition to independence, or the simple may never learn to be wise.

“So it is important to help the simple, but only to an end. And it does no good to help them to a false end, or an end that leads to harm. But you are a creature of peace, so I’m sure that you only wish the greatest end for your kind.

“And the greatest end is Truth. And wisdom is the means to that end, because wisdom is the attainment of Truth. And all ends other than Truth are false, and create chaos in the mind, so no peace may come of it.

“Therefore, my responsibility is: *to seek Truth and assist the simple of mankind in finding that same Truth; to push toward Truth with wisdom; and not to give help where help does no good, but to transition help to independence so the simple learn to be wise.*

“Go now, sparrow! Perform your responsibility, as the simple of your kind must be deterred from harm and assisted toward Truth.”

With that, the sparrow flew away.

AFTERNOON

THE humble prophet Zesia was meditating in the shade beneath a willow tree when Lucia arrived. Lucia is the village witch and practices the Black Arts. Although she harbors wicked intentions in every action she performs, Zesia is still tender to her, as he is tender to all living things.

Lucia spoke, “Who are you talking to, Zesia? I’ve been eavesdropping and overheard everything you said, but there’s no one else here. Are you hiding someone you shouldn’t be associating with? Or were you just talking to yourself?”

“Lucia, I welcome your presence. Yet I assure you, there was no one else here. As you know, I often speak with Nature. But never mind, as that conversation has flown. Come sit with me; I have a question for you.”

Lucia sat beside Zesia.

“I’ll be honest, Lucia. I have spoken with the townsfolk about you, but they spoke more than I did, as I am not in the habit of making small talk. And although gossip is an enduring practice amongst the community, I do not wish to discuss their idle rumors right now.

“What has captured my attention is how drastically the townsfolk change when you come around. In your absence, they say things like, ‘Lucia is Evil and harbors dark intentions, so we’d better not associate with the likes of her.’ But in your presence, they change their tone and say, ‘Welcome, Lucia! How pleasant to see you. Are there any services you’d like performed?’

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“And my question is about this, as you are surely using some sort of craft to sway the townsfolk into your favor. So tell me, enchanting Lucia, what is the secret behind your power with the people?”

Lucia replied, “Zesia, I’ve also spoken with the townsfolk about you and eked out many dear confessions from them. It’s true what they say, both about my being Evil, and also about you. And they say, ‘Zesia is wiser than most, and perhaps the wisest in all the community!’ Now I see what all the fuss is about, as I gave diligent care to conceal my craft from the public eye, but still somehow you’ve detected it. No matter, I’ll just cast a binding spell and place you under my command!”

Lucia removed a strand of twine from her satchel and began tying it into knots while chanting, “By knot of one, the spell’s begun. By knot of two, the spell comes true. By knot of three, Zesia belongs to me.”

Nothing special happened.

“That’s odd; my spell was ineffective. Somehow you’re impervious to my craft, Zesia.”

“Your spell was clever, Lucia. But I only service one thing: Truth. So when your intentions become genuine, I will gladly assist you.

“But you have yet to answer my question and reveal the secret behind your power with the people. And I know that this is a desirable power sought by many, but you can trust your secret with me because I do not intend to exploit it; I purely wonder how it works.”

Lucia replied, “Yes, Zesia, I’m sure you’d like to know. But my covenant has sworn me to secrecy, so the answer to your question must remain with me alone. And even if I was at liberty to dispel my secret, you’ve never given me any reason to dispel it to you. Because I’ve

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seen you around, yes, and the townsfolk do gossip and make dear confessions of you, true; but that doesn't add up to much.

“And as far as I'm concerned, Zesia, I believe your craft is much trickier than mine, because you tell the community that you're a prophet, and a seer of Truth. I make no such claims. My craft is obscure and subtle; I leave the community alone to sort out their beliefs amongst themselves. If they don't want to serve me, I've never given them any reason, other than my words, not to do as they please.”

“Yet, charming Lucia, your words are very persuasive, so that must be the source of your power with the people. And I have been wondering about this power for quite some time, but wonder is a despicable thing and I wish to rid myself of it. So now I will extract the Truth from you, with or without your cooperation.”

“Very well Zesia, you may try.”

“One day I saw you heading to the marketplace, Lucia. Before you arrived, the people began whispering amongst themselves. And although they covered their lips, I simply read their thoughts. And they thought, ‘Oh, no! Here comes Lucia. If we're not careful, she'll trick us into giving our wares to her for free. Hurry! Let's close up shop.’ And it was so.

“They shut their doors and left you out in the world. But you shouted, ‘Open shop! I'm your customer and I'm getting cranky!’ And although I could tell they didn't want to, they eventually let you in.

“After you gathered your merchandise and it came time to pay, you made a swirling motion with your hand. The shopkeeper trembled and said, ‘No charge this time, Lucia! Take whatever you please.’ Everyone watched in shock as you took your merchandise to the street without paying.

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“That was when I first noticed your power with the people. Since then, I have been watching you in the community to study your ways, and I am starting to catch on. As you said yourself: it’s only your words that influence people to serve you. So that is a key. But you also sway them in your favor and away from their best interest. And that is the lock.”

“Yet I am aware of the booby trap you set for me, which I will attempt to avoid. Your hopes are that I try to open the lock with the key. And since the key is your words, then I should recite your words in mind, sifting through them over and over, becoming entranced with what you say. This is exactly what you want, because then your words would cease to be my key and become a spell that binds me.

“But how can I open a lock without the key? I must think like a locksmith; and instead of examining the missing key, a locksmith examines the lock.

“When I examine you swaying people in your favor and away from their best interest, I see three parts: the best interest, your favor, and the act of swaying from one to the other. Of these, the act of swaying is most important and reminds me of this story:

“When the great Emperors of China were fearful that their borders may be breached, they pondered ways to protect their sovereignty. Thus, they developed a plan to build a great wall. And it was so.

“The Emperors constructed a great wall to ease their fears, and so no one could cross into their boundary, and so the whole of China may refrain from invasion.

“Like Emperors, common people also fear that their privacy may be invaded. And although their concerns are valid when there is a real risk of this, such concerns are unfounded when there is no risk.

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“And you, sly Lucia, weasel your way into the imagination of the townsfolk and plant false fears. You frighten them into believing that you will transform them into a toad, or a newt, or some other ridiculous thing. But they are at no risk of this!

“Still, they foolishly give credit to your sorcery, unknowing that your only sorcery is your craft, and your craft is simply convincing them of your sorcery. After their mind is clouded with these misconceptions, you employ your key, which is in reality a snare, and they get tangled up in your madness. Thus, they are like clay, and you are the potter who molds them into the utensil of your liking.

“But that which is not true is false, and creates chaos in the mind, so no peace may come of it. Consequently, the townsfolk are in perpetual turmoil as a result of your craft. What’s more, you exasperate their turmoil by seizing their wares, and shame! For you have done a great disservice to the simple of mankind.

“And although your covenant has sworn you to secrecy, they cannot blame you if you merely corroborate what I rightly said. Confess to me, Lucia. Is this the method behind your power with the people?”

Lucia wept, “Yes, Zesia. This is precisely the method. But please don’t hate me for it; I’m not really Evil. You see, it was the townsfolk who molded me like clay, and they the potters, not the other way around. They started spreading rumors that I harbor dark intentions and practice the Black Arts. Before long, they cast me out of the community and I took refuge with the other outcasts in my covenant. So it wasn’t me who planted false fears in their imagination; they were already afraid. I only played the role of a witch because they forced it upon me. Please believe me, Zesia, it’s exactly as I told you: I leave the community alone to sort out their beliefs amongst themselves.”

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“Very well, tender Lucia. I believe you. And you are correct that the townsfolk are already afraid, as mankind is a fretful animal with no natural defense. The tiger was given his fangs, and the falcon his talons, and the snake his venom. But all mankind was given is wisdom, so Truth is our only defense.

“And the wild animals were fortunate to be born with their weapons intact and the instincts to use them. But at birth, the wisdom of man is dwarfed indeed, so we must pool our knowledge in the community and enlarge our wisdom together. And there is only one substance that enlarges wisdom: Truth.

“Now you see, sweet Lucia, you cannot just ignore fallacies and leave it up to the community to sort out, or their wisdom will diminish and they won’t know Truth. And Truth is a great thing, so to not know it is a shame.

“But you overheard me talking this morning, so you already know the benefits of Truth. And I am glad that my words did not fall wasted on the dirt.

“Now, Lucia, will you abandon the craft and accept your responsibility of seeking Truth and assisting the simple of mankind in finding that same Truth?”

Lucia exclaimed, “Yes, Zesia. I will abandon the craft and pursue Truth to expand my wisdom. Because I don’t like being whispered about in my absence and left with no alternative but manipulating the townsfolk into giving me goods and services for free.

“So I will practice reciprocity, not persuasion, with the people. And I will pay for my merchandise in the marketplace from now on. And I will participate in the community. And I will work as a schoolteacher to assist the simple of mankind toward Truth. What’s more, I will abandon my name Lucia, as that name was given to me by my covenant, and not my

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true name, which is Mary. And now I have forsaken the craft and set upon the path toward Truth.”

“What a relief, Mary! But there is still one thing that I have yet to unravel: how to have power with the people. As you already know, one way to have power with the people is to employ the craft. But there is another way you can still have power with the people.

“And that is the opposite way of the craft; the way of Truth. And rather than sway people from their best interest toward harm, you can sway them from harm back toward their best interest. And what interest is better than Truth? But I can think of nothing.

“Therefore, the way to have power with the people is: *to sway them toward Truth, not toward personal favor; to sway them with wisdom, not craft; and to reinforce their wisdom, so Truth may stand as a great wall that protects them from false fears.*

“Go now, Mary! Sway the townsfolk toward Truth and they will fear you no longer.”

With that, Mary returned to the community.

EVENING

EPILOGUE

DAY is coming to an end

The noise of rustling carts and people hurrying home fills the air

Smoke billows from the dotted chimneys scattered throughout the village

Wives stoke fires

Stirring stew over the flames

Children scamper to squeeze as much playtime as they can into the final hour of day

They struggle to pull themselves away from their friends

Groups of men sit on stools at the local pub

Gulping tankards of ale

Exchanging stories

And forgetting them as a new ale arrives

Zesia rises from his meditation

Channeling the noises and aromas of the village

His mind flutters with mosaic patterns of thought

Night descends upon the village in its cloak of darkness

Muscling away daylight

Shouldering its strength against retreating sunrays with a brooding force

Grinning at the shuttering windows

Laughing as people take refuge behind candles

The villagers fear Night

Goblins and demons roam wild in his dark sky

Fiends snatch children from their beds

Devouring them with delight

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Zesia looks higher into the sky
The stars begin to make their appearance

The stars blink silently
Bright with wonder
Boundless with question

Night speaks to Zesia in a whisper of thought
“Mankind is easily misled
My sin is casting illusion
Their sin is accepting it
The peccadillo blossoms into fear
When fear rules the terrain of thought
My darkness flourishes”

Zesia says,
“The sound of Truth
Is clear and resonant
Reverberating
Like the bell of a ship coasting into port
It clangs with joy
It does not take golden shoes
To dance to its tune
Truth is the light
That conquers all darkness”

THE END