

BRAIN POWER

Mr. William Portals, without a doubt the richest man in the world, had gone to great lengths to assemble an elite of intellectuals from all over the world. Every living Nobel and literary prize winner, as well as the world's leading scientists, philosophers, economists, political scientists, sociologists, psychologists, medical practitioners, engineers, historians, artists, composers, technological experts, business, labour and political leaders, designers and anyone else who had made a major impact on the world had been induced to attend this extraordinary palaver. Perhaps the monetary inducement, the opportunity to visit Mr. Portals in his fabulous and secluded residence whose locale was never revealed, and a natural curiosity played a part in their putting in an appearance. What they did not know and were never told, that to be invited, each had to have a minimum I.Q. of 140. Mr. Portals had his means of making this determination.

Mr. Stevenson, who introduced himself as Mr. Portals' Secretary, greeted the guests upon their arrival and invited them to partake of Mr. Portals' hospitality. Each female and male guest was provided with a 'lady in waiting' and a 'man servant' respectively. Actually, the total staff far exceeded the number of guests, to ensure that everything went off without a hitch.

"The reason for this get-together will be made known in due course," added Mr. Stevenson, somewhat guilefully. "In the mean time, take full advantage of the diversions, good food and refreshments available. You will be earning them soon enough."

The first three days went by leisurely, allowing the invitees to enjoy themselves and get to know one another. Every luxury for every taste was made available. However, during this time, the guests were being surreptitiously spied upon. Those with an excessive predilection for sex, gambling, liquor, narcotics, food, etc. or for behavior regarded as abnormal, e.g., maso-sadism, homosexuality, temperamental, hysterical or violent comportment were gently but firmly obliged to leave. They were well remunerated and told that if they revealed anything they would pay a very unpleasant price. The threat, while tacit, was real enough as one of them subsequently learned. Since he had no evidence to disclose he could not prove that any such get-together had taken place. Mr. Portals made sure that his tarnished reputation ruined him completely. It turned out that the number obliged to depart was surprisingly small. Mr. Portals and his minions had done their homework very well.

On the evening of the third day, at dinner, the assemblage was notified that the reason they had been invited would be revealed to them the next morning at a breakfast meeting. They were also told that failing to attend would be taken as an example of improper behavior and that person would be compelled to leave immediately. Suffice to say, without exception, everyone showed up.

While coffee was being poured, Mr. Stevenson stood up and stated.

"Mr. Portals will shortly talk to you via closed circuit television. He will also try to answer any questions put to him. However, I suspect that there will be no need for queries. His proposal will be succinct, very clear and to the point."

Then Mr. Stevenson sat down, whereupon a large wall panel slid open revealing an equally large TV screen with Mr. Portals comfortably seated on a plush divan. He addressed the group.

"I apologize for not being present in person. It would have given me great pleasure to meet you personally. However, the pressures of my many business affairs prevented this from happening. I hope to be able to visit with you in the near future.

Now without further ado let us proceed with the business at hand, that is the reason I brought you all together. I am sure you are all aware of my enormous wealth. It is so huge as to be obscene and no matter how much I give away it is increasing exponentially. I do not know whether you are familiar with the myriad of ways I have poured money into all sorts of so called good causes. I won't go into that, except to categorically state that the results of my efforts have been most disappointing.

I had hoped that my wealth could be put to good use in resolving our world's many problems. Not only have my efforts failed, but the difficulties facing us seem to be growing and are being exacerbated by a host of unprecedented issues. These include, amongst others, concerns over the; environment/ecology; politics, racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural divisions; equity; science/knowledge; technology; economics; militarism; urban growth and violence; youth and education; and sophisticated armaments. Of course, all of these are interconnected. At the core of these is us, perhaps the greatest paradox of all. We, who are capable of so much good, seem to have an even greater propensity for evil. As Walt Kelly's Pogo once observed, "I recognize de enemy and dey is us."

Now what has this to do with all of you? As you must have realized by now, you have all been carefully selected. You are leaders in your respective endeavors. You are at the height of your powers and careers. You are the foremost thinkers and doers that I could find. You represent a melange of analytical and creative brains never before assembled. If there were such an aristocracy of mental powers and personages of accomplishment, it would consist largely of you. You represent a very wide variety of activities. I have brought you here to form a multidisciplinary, regional, national, racial, ethnic think tank unlike any other. You have one aim and that is to work together to resolve, as best you can, the problems facing us. I hope you will be able to arrive at means allowing humanity to live in harmony with its environment and itself.

I realize that this is no easy task. I feel that you are mankind's last hope. It is my optimistic expectation that you all feel the same way I do and that you will cooperate with each other and do your utmost to attain the goal I have in mind. You will be provided with all the resources you require. You will be free to organize yourselves into working groups as you decide.

Finally, I insist that these efforts be kept secret for reasons that should be obvious. For example, undue expectations, jealous rivalries, and political interference, could easily destroy our efforts. If any of you do not wish to participate in this enterprise, you are of course free to leave. You will be compensated for your time here. For those who stay, and upon completion of the mission, the rewards will be great indeed.

Are there any questions?"

A voice from the assemblage responded.

"I have two questions. First, it is evident that you must have given this a great deal of thought, whereas we have just been told about it. In light of that and your vast experience, how do you think we should organize ourselves? Should we break up into groups? Should there be a hierarchy of priorities? Should we look for a leader to help shepherd our course?

Secondly, the complexity of the problem due to the vast number of interdependent variables involved may make our task an impossible one. What do you suggest we do if we find it impossible to arrive at a plausible solution, one with a reasonable chance of success?"

Mr. Portals' response was terse and to the point.

"You are right. We did give this matter a great deal of thought and concluded that any intimation on our part of how you should conduct your affairs would be inappropriate. You represent an intellectual elite that we believe should be able to decide on your course. It might very well be that the process you choose will be totally innovative and of more significance than the answer you arrive at. Your question pertaining to leadership reflects our traditional way of doing things. Again, you are all at the top of your fields and I am sure with egos to match. I doubt that appointing anyone 'Head' of anything would serve a useful purpose. I do suggest that, if required, Mr. Stevenson, my very capable assistant, or any of his aides, could chair meetings or working sessions.

As for your second question, what can I say? There certainly is a distinct possibility that you will fail. Do your best. At least we will have tried. In any case, whatever you come up with will be most welcome, even if its chances of success are slim.

Are there any other questions?"

The TV screen went blank when no else replied. Mr. Stevenson arose and reiterated that he and his associates were available to assist each and all in any pertinent manner. They left the meeting place, leaving the group to its own devices.

Dear Reader. At this point in the narrative, I, the author of this far fetched fable find myself in a quandary. Those of you who have read my other stories will probably be able to predict what is coming. Also, I find it most disconcerting when I can predict how one of my stories will turn out. Therefore, I wish to try a novel approach to the ending of this woe begotten tale. I am offering two endings. As I see it, you have three choices. First, you can exercise your right as a critic and completely reject and discard this story into the trash can. Second, you can read both of my proposed endings, as dreary as they might be and select one that you favor. Third, you can fabricate an ending of your own. If you choose the latter course, I implore you not to transmit it to me. I won't know what to do with it. I do not wish to be discourteous and exercise my right as a critic. Besides, I will already have selected my favorite, which I will not disclose to anyone although, I suspect you all will be able to guess correctly which it is.

ENDING NUMBER 1

Four months later, Mr. Stevenson met with Mr. Portals in the latter's private inner sanctum. He appeared to be quite weary. Without much ado, Mr. Portals asked for a report as to what had and was transpiring. Mr. Stevenson placed a written report on the desk and proceeded to give a brief oral summary account.

"This is the tenth group of high IQ personages that we have assembled, except that on this occasion they were all well known. Well, they did no better than any of the other groups. If anything, they were worse, perhaps because the expectations we entertained were so positive. For the most part, their egos were so inflated that each with such a trait was certain that he or she had the answer to the problem that we had put to them. They simply were not able to entertain any solutions other than their own. The few who were able to put their individuality aside and try to really operate in a multi-disciplinary mode were quickly marginalized. The situation was further exacerbated because of ideological biases which could not be overcome. Finally, an old bureaucratic adage seemed to be in command, namely, 'Paralysis by Analysis', which got them bogged down in a morass of details, not allowing them to see the forest from the trees.

The real pity is that they seemed to get off to a good start. However, all it took was a small cadre of myopic intellectuals to infect the assembly with the virus of egoism. From then on it was all down hill. As with the other assemblages, instead of dividing themselves into working groups with a healthy and reasonable mix of ideas, the groups ended up representing all the divisive forces already plaguing this world of ours. It even got to a point where the threat of real violence became menacingly real. They have all been sent packing, hopefully with their tail between their legs. Perhaps they have learnt something from this experience, but I doubt it. No one appeared to be willing to take any responsibility for the fiasco."

Mr. Portals asked if there was anything positive to report. Somewhat hesitatingly, Mr. Stevenson suggested that there was.

"After the elitists were gone, all of the staff, including the menial workers and servants, and I got together to recap what had transpired. Now, we all knew that we were not in the IQ league of our recent invitees, but we were not exactly slouches either, otherwise, you would not have hired us. Somebody suggested that perhaps the problem was that one could have too much of a good thing. It seemed that the intellectual elite of the world are not able to cut away detritus surrounding a complex problem and get to the core of it. He added that he and some other members of the staff had created a far from perfect computer model of our world. They had inserted as many variables as possible and then tried changing conditions to determine whether there was a way to harmonize them.

With a degree of alacrity and enthusiasm, we all got involved in trying to improve the model and to see of what help it could be. Alas, what we discovered was that the model was of no use. However, it did identify the most important variable. It is one that is non-quantifiable and frequently unpredictable. It is, of course humanity. It became evident that what was needed was something that could transcend all the human divisive parameters. After hours of discussion, we agreed that two things were needed. First was the transcendental factor itself and the other was a means, mostly symbolic, of conveying it.

Tackling the second element first, we identified you, with all your wealth and the control you wield over much of the world's communication system as someone who should become a benevolent dictator, operating behind the scenes while allowing the populace of the world to continue believing that democracy was still in place. Mr. Churchill was quite wrong when he identified 'democracy' with all its flaws as the best form of government. True democracy is a myth. Even when practiced, it can only lead to anarchy and chaos, two outcomes to be desperately avoided. Perhaps the best model was one proposed over two thousand years ago by Plato in his "Republic".

As for the transcendental factor, we could identify only one that could bring all the varying racial, religious, ethnic, groups together in a responsive fashion to all the problems facing contemporary humanity. It is neither 'love' nor 'hate'. Both have been tried. Perhaps it does not say much for humankind, but we, the group, felt the most powerful factor would be fear, fear based upon a perceived threat to human survival. We leave it to the psychological experts at your disposal to identify what item of fear or dread would be most effective. Perhaps an invasion from outer space; or a huge meteorite on a collision course with earth; or a contagious disease affecting all of us, or an environmental threat that might wipe out all our food and water supplies; are examples that might be considered.

As far as we are concerned, the ball is now in your court."

ENDING NUMBER TWO

Four months later, Mr. Stevenson met with Mr. Portals in the latter's private inner sanctum. He appeared to be quite enervated. Without much ado, Mr. Portals asked for a report as to what had and was transpiring. Mr. Stevenson placed a written report on the desk and proceeded to give a brief oral summary account.

"This is the tenth group of high IQ personages that we have assembled, except that on this occasion they were all famous. It is my opinion that this time we have struck gold. They seemed to know, instinctively, how to organize themselves without any sense of hierarchy. They got down to brass tacks immediately. Here was a prime example of the collective wisdom of the group being substantially greater than the sum of each individual's. No sign of ego involvement was apparent. Obviously, they felt that the survival of mankind is more important than individual glory. One humorously suggested that, in any case, they had all attained as much acclaim as was good for them and more than they could handle.

After a number of trials and errors based upon much useful interplay of ideas from all over, they convinced me that they had reached a consensual solution. Their enthusiasm was contagious, so much so, that I am sure they do indeed have the answer. Using a simulation model they showed me a world in total harmony, with all healthy human differences maintained. I do not pretend to understand how they accomplished this, what the details of their solution are or how it would be implemented. It is somewhat like an incomprehensible black box producing desirable results. They feel they need another two to three months to wrap it all up. Once implemented, the changes, according to them, would be quite rapid."

Mr. Portals sighed audibly. "I am afraid it is too little too late. WW 3 has just been declared. We hardly have two hours, let alone two months. It is too bad that we didn't use their collective wisdom years ago. I wish I knew.....

Jack Basuk, May 13, 1999

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