

## Kokoro – Sensei and I – Parts 19 to 27

Natsume Sōseki – 1914

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Initially, I'd engaged with Sensei's wife as a partner in rational discourse. As we'd spoken, though, her manner had gradually changed. Instead of appealing to my reason, she began to touch my emotions. There was no ill will between her and Sensei, nor should there have been. Yet something was wrong. Then again, on closer inspection, there was nothing to be found. Such was the nature of her angst.

She had first asserted that since Sensei was weary of the world he must also be weary of her. Even while asserting this, she was not fully satisfied with it. Digging deeper, the converse had also crossed her mind. She imagined that Sensei's displeasure with her had turned him away from the world in general. However, try as she might, she could not substantiate this fear. Sensei's demeanor was that of the good husband. He was always kind and caring. Day by day, though, she'd harbored shades of doubt and tucked them away in the depths of her bosom. On this evening, she brought them forth in my presence.

“What do you think,” she asked, “is it my doing? Or is it as you said, that his view of the world has somehow disturbed him? Please be candid.”

I had no intention of being anything but candid. However, if there were facts unknown to me, and I believed that indeed there were, then any answer I gave would certainly prove inadequate.

“I don't know.”

Her look at that moment was one of dismay, of one who's hopes had been dashed. I immediately added to my answer. “But I can assure you that Sensei holds you in highest regard. I've heard this from him directly, and Sensei is nothing if not an honest man.”

She gave no reply. After a while she spoke further. “There is one thing that comes to mind ...”

“You mean to explain Sensei's temperament?”

“Yes. And if it were to be the cause, then I wouldn't have to worry it might be me. That alone would be a great relief.”

“What is it you're thinking?”

She gazed at her hands, which were resting on her thighs, seemingly reluctant to continue. “Here it is then. Give me your opinion.”

“I'll do my best.”

“I can't tell you everything. Sensei would be terribly upset if I did. I'll tell you just what I can.”

I swallowed tensely.

“In his student days at the university, Sensei had one very close friend. Shortly before graduation, that friend died. He died unexpectedly.” She leaned close to my ear and added in a whisper, “He died an unnatural death.”

When she told me this, I couldn’t help but ask how he’d died.

“That’s all I’m at liberty to say. But it was after his death that Sensei began to change. I don’t know what led to his death, and I suspect that Sensei may not know either. However, it’s not inconceivable that his death is tied to Sensei’s change.”

“Is the grave in Zōshigaya that of this friend?”

“I’ve promised never to speak of that, so I won’t. Could the death of one close friend affect a person so? That’s what I need to know. I’d like your opinion on this.”

It seemed, in my mind, not likely.

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Based on what little I knew, I did my best to console her. Sensei’s wife, for her part, tried to find comfort in my company. We continued conversing on this same subject. However, I was far from grasping the heart of the matter. Her disquiet stemmed from misgivings, and those misgivings, in turn, were but as an errant wisp of telltale vapor. When it came to the true nature of things, there was much that she herself didn’t know. What she did know, she was not at liberty to disclose in full. Thus it was that I, who sought to console her, and she, who sought comfort, were like two souls adrift on the waves. To steady herself, she reached out her hand to me, latching on to my equally ungrounded counsel.

Around ten o’clock, the sound of Sensei’s footsteps echoed in the entryway. His wife, seeming to brush aside all that we’d been speaking of, immediately sprang to her feet. Leaving me behind, she rushed out to greet Sensei, almost bumping into him as he slid open the panel. I followed after as fast as I could. Only the maidservant, who must have been dozing, failed to appear.

Sensei was in good spirits. His wife, however, looked happier still. I recalled how moments earlier her brow had been drawn tight and her delicate eyes had glistened with tears. The transformation was extraordinary. Assuming it was not all a ruse (and I couldn’t imagine that it was), then it was entirely possible that I’d been played upon, in some mischievous female fashion, for the sake of my sentiment. In that moment, though, I wasn’t wont to view Sensei’s wife in such light. The lifting of her spirits, rather, relieved me. I realized then that I needn’t have been so concerned.

“Thank you for securing the fort,” Sensei said to me with a grin. “I take it the burglar didn’t show? I hope you weren’t disappointed.”

As I prepared to depart, Sensei's wife thanked me for my trouble. More than the trouble of an evening away from my studies, she seemed to refer, half-jokingly, to the trouble of staking out a burglar in vain. As she spoke, she pressed a paper-wrapped package into my hands. It was the remainder of the sweets she'd served me earlier. I dropped it into my sleeve pocket and stepped out into the evening chill. Winding my way through the empty side streets, I hurried on toward the lights of the town.

I've related in detail all that I remember of that evening. I've related it because it bears relating. The truth, however, is that the conversation of that night, as I made my way home with my package of sweets, did not strike me as all that important. The following day, I came home from school for lunch and found the package of sweets on my desk, where I'd set it the night before. I immediately unwrapped it, picked out a reddish brown piece of castella spread with chocolate, and bit off a large piece. As I savored the cake, I thought of the couple from whom I'd received it, a happy pair together against the world.

Autumn gave way uneventfully to winter. I continued my visits to Sensei's home. When I was there, I sometimes asked his wife for help in washing and mending my clothes. I'd never worn undergarments, but I began at this time to sport a black collared garment over my undershirt. Sensei's wife, who had no children to mind, was happy to assist me. It kept her busy, she said, and the physical work did her good.

"This is hand woven. I've never sewn such fine fabric. It's not easy, though, to put a needle through it. I've broken two already."

Even when she voiced such objections, her expression assured me that she was not in the least put out.

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That winter, I was unexpectedly called home. I received a letter from my mother informing me that my father's illness had taken a turn for the worse. There was no immediate concern, but he was on in years, so I should make my way home as soon as possible.

My father's kidneys had been troubling him for some time. As often happens past middle age, his malady had turned chronic. At the same time, both my father and the family were confident that with proper care his condition was more or less manageable. To visitors, he would even declare that he owed his survival to prudent rest and judicious recovery. Then one day, according to my mother's letter, after an outing in the garden he'd grown dizzy and fallen. Members of the household, assuming he'd suffered a mild stroke, immediately treated him accordingly. The doctor, however, on examining him later, was of a different opinion, linking the incident to the state of his kidneys. The family had not theretofore associated kidney disease with swooning.

It was only a short while till winter break, and I saw no problem in waiting for the term to end. However, from time to time over the next several days I imagined my father in bed and the worried look on my mother's face. These visions nipped at my conscience, until finally I resolved to return. To save the time and trouble of remittance, I decided to ask Sensei to advance me travel money when I called to take my leave.

Sensei, who was down with a touch of a cold, had me shown directly to his study. Warm sunlight, so rarely seen since the onset of winter, shone through the glass doors and fell across the surface of his desk. In the middle of this well-lit room, Sensei had placed a large brazier. To help him breathe easier, a metal basin had been filled with water and placed on the kettle stand. Steam wafted up from the basin.

“I’d rather it were something serious. These minor colds are the worst thing of all.” Sensei looked at me with a wry smile as he spoke.

This from a man who’d never in his life been seriously ill. I couldn’t help but smile.

“I’d gladly take a cold in exchange for something worse. I expect you would too, if you once fell truly ill.”

“I don’t know. If I ever do fall ill, then I’d just as well fall deathly ill.”

I dismissed this as idle chatter, proceeded to relate the contents of my mother’s letter, and asked if I might borrow some money.

“I’m sorry to hear about your father. We should have adequate cash on hand.”

Sensei summoned his wife and had her bring the required amount. She carefully laid out the money, which she’d gone in and pulled from a drawer in the cupboard or elsewhere, on a sheet of white paper that she’d set out before me. “You must be concerned.”

“Are his fainting spells frequent?” Sensei asked.

“There was nothing about that in the letter -- is it something that recurs?”

“Yes.”

I learned for the first time that Sensei’s wife’s mother had died of the same illness.

“That doesn’t sound good,” I said.

“I’m afraid not. I’d take his place for you if I could -- has he felt nauseous?”

“I don’t know. There was no mention of it, so I expect not.”

“If he’s not nauseous then he’s still all right,” Sensei’s wife added.

I left Tōkyō that same day on the evening train.

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Father’s condition was not as bad as I’d feared. Even so, when I arrived I found him sitting in bed. “Everyone’s worried, so I’m biding my time. I’m well enough to get up,” he told me.

The very next day, despite my mother's objections, he did get out of bed. "Now that you're home, your father suddenly has his energy back," my mother remarked as she reluctantly folded away the thick futon. It seemed to me, though, that he was not just putting on a brave face - he really did look okay.

My older brother had taken on work in far off Kyūshū. Under all but the most pressing circumstances, it was not easy for him to make his way back. My younger sister had married a man in another province, and she too was not easily summoned home. Of us three siblings, it was me, the student, who was most at the ready to come when called. Father took great satisfaction in the fact that I'd put aside my studies for his sake and come home early at mother's behest.

"I'm sorry we've disrupted your studies. It was really nothing serious. Mother overstates things in her letters." Father spoke thus, and once he was out of bed, he did indeed seem back to his usual self.

"Don't overdo it, or you'll end up back in bed."

Father appreciated my concern but paid little heed to my warning. "I'm fine. I know my limitations."

He did, in fact, look fine. As he moved about the house, there was no shortness of breath, and he experienced no dizzy spells. His complexion was terribly pale, but this had been the case for quite some while, so we saw no particular cause for concern.

I wrote to Sensei to thank him for the loan. I told him I would repay him in person after my return to Tōkyō in the new year, and I asked for his patience until that time. I followed with news from home - father's condition was not as serious as I'd feared; at this rate we could rest assured for a while; there were no further spells of vertigo and no signs of nausea. In closing, I added my wishes for Sensei's recovery from his cold, which I knew to be nothing severe.

I posted my letter, with no expectation of receiving a reply. After I sent it, I talked with my mother and father of Sensei. As we talked, I pictured in my mind his distant study.

"When you return to Tōkyō, you should take him some mushrooms."

"I could, but I wonder if he eats dried mushrooms."

"They're nothing special, but I've never known anyone to dislike them."

Somehow Sensei and dried mushrooms struck me as incongruous.

I was caught by surprise when a letter arrived from Sensei. I was especially surprised to find that it contained nothing of particular importance. Sensei had written me solely out of kindness. Looking at it in this light, this single short letter warmed my heart, even more so since it was the first letter Sensei wrote me.

In stating that this was my first letter from Sensei, I don't mean to imply that we ever became frequent correspondents. Quite to the contrary, in fact, I received only two letters from Sensei during his lifetime.

The first was this brief reply that I've just mentioned. The second was a lengthy piece that he wrote to me shortly before his death.

My father, due to the nature of his illness, was limited in his activities. Even after getting out of bed, he seldom ventured outdoors. On one afternoon, when the weather was unseasonably mild, he did go down to the garden. I stayed at his side the entire time, on the off chance that something should happen. I asked him to keep his hand on my shoulder, but he countered with a grin that he could manage just fine.

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I kept my father company and helped him pass the time, often in front of the shōgi board. Indulging our indolence, we sunk ourselves into the kotatsu, the game board placed over its frame. After each move, we'd retract our hands to the warmth of the quilting. From time to time we'd lose a captured piece, only discovering its absence when we went to start our next game. I can picture still my mother discovering a piece among the ashes and retrieving it with the fire tongs.

“The go board is too thick, especially with its feet, for play on the kotatsu. This shōgi board is just right. We can play in comfort. Perfect for a couple of idlers. How 'bout another game?”

Father would always call for another game after winning. He would call for one after losing too. In short, whether he won or he lost, he was content to settle into the kotatsu and play shōgi. This retirement-like lifestyle was something novel to me, and for a while I embraced its amusements. As the days and hours passed, though, the energy of youth made me restless for something more. I'd stretch my arms above my head, gripping a shōgi piece, a gold general or a lance, in my fist. Sometimes I'd even yawn overtly.

I thought about Tōkyō. I listened to the rhythm of my heart as my blood swelled and raced within it. Strangely, in the right state of consciousness, I could feel Sensei lending vigor to the pulse of that rhythm.

Inwardly, I compared my father and Sensei. Both lived quiet lives, the outside world oblivious to their existence. In terms of societal impact, both men registered nil. Be that as it may, I found this father of mine, who sought to engage me in shōgi for the sake of diversion, somehow lacking. Sensei, with whom I'd never shared such pastimes, touched my mind more profoundly than any companion in amusements ever could have. To say he touched my mind is too cerebral. I should rather say he moved my heart. To state that his spirit energized my flesh, or that his life force coursed through my veins, by no means exaggerates my feelings of that time. When I looked about me, the obvious yet inconvenient fact that I was my father's son, while Sensei was a complete stranger, left me unsettled.

About the time I began feeling restless, the novelty of my presence was also wearing off for my mother and father. Little by little, they tired of me. Anyone, I expect, who's returned to the country for summer vacation or some such occasion has experienced like feelings. After being fussed over excessively for the first week or so, there comes a point where the magic is exhausted, and hospitality drops to the level of indifference or disregard. In the course of my stay, I passed this point. To make matters worse, I always came home with a piece of Tōkyō in me, something alien to my mother and father. In former times, this might be akin to stepping into a Confucian household steeped in Christian beliefs. My mother and father were not at all

amenable to the changes they saw. I had no intention of offending their sensibilities, but I couldn't conceal who I was. Despite my best efforts, things would catch their attention. Life at home was an ever-increasing strain. I couldn't wait to return to Tōkyō.

Fortunately, my father's condition seemed stable. There were no indications he was failing. To be sure, we summoned a specialist from afar and had him conduct a thorough examination. He told us nothing we didn't already know. I decided to leave a little before the end of break. Once I announced my plans, my mother and father, true to human nature, entreated me to stay.

“Already? Do you have to go so soon?” my mother asked.

“You can stay a bit longer yet, can't you?” my father added.

I held firm and departed as planned.

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Back in Tōkyō, the festive pine ornaments had all been cleared away. A cold wind scoured the streets. Signs of the New Year were few and far between.

Without delay, I called on Sensei to return the money I'd borrowed. I also took with me the dried mushrooms from home. Uncomfortable simply handing them to Sensei's wife, I explained first that my mother had prepared them for me to bring as a gift. They were packed in a new cake box. Sensei's wife received them with due ceremony. She picked up the box to take it into the next room and, perhaps surprised at its lightness, asked what sort of cakes they were. Sensei's wife, once one came to know her, would sometimes display this overtly candid and child-like spirit.

The two of them, concerned for my father's health, asked various questions about his illness. Finally Sensei said, “From what you've told us, it seems he's not in immediate danger. Be careful, though. You mustn't drop your guard.”

Sensei knew much more about kidney conditions than I did.

“The thing about kidney disease is that the afflicted party can often be blissfully ignorant. I know of a military officer who succumbed to it. His death was completely unexpected. His wife, who was sleeping at his side, didn't even have the chance to tend to him. He woke her once in the night, saying he felt a bit out of sorts, and the next morning he was gone. According to his wife, she'd thought he was still sleeping.”

The optimism I'd been feeling quickly faded.

“I wonder about my father then. Could he meet the same end?”

“What did the doctor say?”

“That there's no way to cure him, but that he's all right for now.”

“If that’s what the doctor says, then I’m sure he’s fine. The fellow I spoke of was unaware of his own condition. On top of that, he was a military man who didn’t know his limitations.”

I felt a bit better. Sensei, who’d been observing my mood, then added, “Human beings, whether healthy or sick, are truly fragile things. There’s no telling who will go when, or in what manner.”

“Then you think about such things too?”

“I may be in good health, but I can’t say the thought never crosses my mind.” Sensei showed a trace of a smile. “Some just slip away easily, in a natural manner. Others are taken in an instant, often through unnatural violence.”

“What sort of unnatural violence?”

“I can’t give specifics, but suicide would be an example. It’s unnatural, and inevitably involves some form of violence.”

“Those who are murdered, then, also die of unnatural violence.”

“I hadn’t thought of murder, but yes, that’s the same kind of thing.”

After that I returned home. Once home, I no longer dwelled on thoughts of my father. Nor did I fixate on Sensei’s words. What he’d said about natural and unnatural death had been interesting in the moment, but I soon put it out of my mind. My graduation thesis, which I’d dabbled at in fits and starts, was looming before me. It was time to start writing in earnest.

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To graduate as intended in June, I was required to finish my thesis by the end of April. February, March, April - I counted off the remaining months on my fingers. I wondered if I could really pull it off. Most other students had started some time ago, busily gathering materials and preparing notes, while I had done almost nothing. All I had to my credit was my resolve to start in earnest in the new year. I acted on my resolve and rushed in, only to reach an immediate standstill. I’d been painting grand plans in my mind, framing a structure around my topic, and now I sat with head in hands, anxiety taking root. I narrowed the focus of my thesis. To save the exertion of refining and consolidating ideas, I decided to simply survey the literature and add to it an appropriate conclusion.

My chosen topic was closely connected to Sensei’s area of expertise. Earlier, in making my choice, I’d solicited his opinion and received a favorable response. Still in a state of distress, I set out for Sensei’s for guidance on essential references. Sensei was glad to share what he knew, and he even offered to lend me several books. However, he made it clear that he could not serve as an advisor.

“I don’t read much these days, so I don’t know what’s new. It’s best you consult with one of your professors.”

I remembered learning from Sensei's wife that he'd once been an avid reader, but recently, for whatever reason, he'd lost interest. Forgetting my thesis for the moment, I inquired on this matter.

“Why don't you read like you used to?”

“There's no deep reason. ... maybe, at some point, I just decided it was all in vain. On top of that ...”

“There's more to it yet?”

“Again, it's nothing profound. In my younger days, it was always awkward to be asked something and not have an answer - almost shameful. Lately, though, I've lost that feeling, and with it my drive to read up and stay current. In short, I'm old and decrepit.”

Sensei spoke calmly. From this man who had turned his back on the world came no hint of bitterness. My reaction was accordingly muted. While I didn't view Sensei as old and decrepit, neither could I applaud his department. I took my leave.

From that day forward I toiled at my thesis like a man possessed, looking out on the world through bloodshot eyes. I approached my friends who'd graduated the year before to seek their advice. One of them told me how he'd rushed to the office in a rickshaw just prior to his deadline. Another told me how he'd nearly been rejected for delivering his thesis at fifteen minutes past five. Only by good graces of the department head was it accepted. I was still anxious, but I also felt emboldened. Day after day, I slaved away at my desk, testing my physical limits. If not at my desk, I was in the library, searching among the dimly-lit stacks. I scanned the gold-lettered bindings like a curio hunter let loose among ancient wares.

Plum blossoms appeared, and the cold north wind gradually shifted to a southern breeze. A short while later, talk of cherry blossoms caught my ear. Even so, I kept my eyes trained straight ahead like a cart horse, my thesis deadline forcing me on. Only after those final days of April, when I'd wrapped up my writing according to plan, did I again cross Sensei's threshold.

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I gained my freedom in early summer, just as the double-flowered cherry tree was shedding its last blossoms and starting to show the first faint signs of new green leaves. Like a songbird flown from its cage, I surveyed the world around me and reveled in my new-found freedom. I went at once to see Sensei. Along the way, my eyes were drawn to new buds bursting from the dark branches of a hedge. I also noticed shiny dull-brown leaves budding from a weathered pomegranate trunk, softly reflecting the warm sunlight. Never before had such things enchanted me so.

Sensei saw the joy in my face. “You finished your thesis, I take it. Well done.”

“I did, thanks to your assistance. Everything's done.”

I had, in fact, dispensed with all of my responsibilities. I felt relieved. From this point forward, I was free to flaunt my leisure. I was confident in the thesis I'd written, and satisfied with my effort. I couldn't refrain

from explaining the work at length. Sensei humored me but offered no comment or critique beyond his usual subdued responses. I didn't feel dissatisfied, but I did feel a bit deflated. Even so, I was too full of life on this day to let his detachment go unchallenged. I decided to invite him outside, to witness the great rebirth - all of nature adorning itself in green.

“Sensei, let's go for a walk. It's wonderful out.”

“Where to?”

It didn't matter to me where we went. I simply wished to stroll through nature with Sensei.

An hour later, we'd left the city behind us and were wandering through a quiet rural district. I plucked some tender new leaves off a hedge and made a grass whistle. I'd learned to whistle this way by watching a friend from Kagoshima, and I'd become quite good at it. I whistled on with great satisfaction, while Sensei looked about him, unimpressed with my talent.

By and by we came to a grove of trees, of medium height and thickly veiled in new leaves, through which a small lane passed. “Such-and-such Garden” was posted on the gatepost, so it was clearly not a private estate. Sensei looked at the gently ascending lane and suggested we take it. I replied that it looked to be a nursery.

We proceeded into the thicket, topped a low rise, and saw a house on the left. The shōji were open wide, but there were no inhabitants visible within. The only sign of life was a large bowl, set under the eaves, in which goldfish swam.

“It's quiet back here. Do you think it's okay to proceed unannounced?”

“I don't expect they'll mind.”

We proceeded further, but saw not a soul. Azaleas bloomed in profusion, setting the scene ablaze with color. Sensei pointed out a taller bush of reddish yellow. “That must be kirishima.”

A field was planted with peonies, but it was too early in the season for their flowers. At the edge of the peony field was a raised platform of weathered wood. Sensei laid himself out for a rest. I seated myself on the other edge for a smoke. Sensei gazed into the depths of the clear sky. I took in the colors of the new foliage around us. On close observation, all of the colors were subtly dissimilar. Even among the same variety of maple, no two trees were matched in hue. Sensei's hat, which he'd tossed over the top of a thin cedar sapling, was rocked by the breeze and dropped to the ground.

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I immediately picked up the hat. I used the backs of my nails to flick off specks of red clay and then called to Sensei.

“Your hat fell.”

“Ah, thank you.”

Sensei propped himself up and took the hat. Holding that same position, neither upright nor prone, he posed a curious question.

“If I may ask, is your family well off?”

“I wouldn’t really say so.”

“How much would you say you have? Forgive me for being so blunt.”

“We own some property, fields and surrounding hills. Other than that, no savings to speak of.”

This was the first time Sensei had ever asked directly about my family’s finances. For my part, I’d never asked Sensei about his own circumstances. I had wondered, from the early days of our acquaintance, how he afforded his life of leisure. That question had remained with me, as I had never dared ask him point blank. Now, as I paused in my study of leaves and permitted my eyes a rest, the question was suddenly ripe for the asking.

“How about yourself? How wealthy are you?”

“Do I look like a man of means?”

Sensei was always modest in his dress. His household help was also limited. His house, in turn, was not a large one. It was clear, though, even to myself as an outsider, that he didn’t want for material comforts. In short, while not extravagant, he wasn’t scrimping and saving to get by.

“To some extent,” I answered.

“I do have enough to maintain my current lifestyle, but by no means am I a wealthy man. If I were, I’d build a bigger place.”

Sensei had raised himself and was now sitting cross-legged on the platform. As he finished speaking, he began to trace a circle on the ground with the tip of his bamboo walking stick. After closing the circle, he thrust his stick straight into the earth.

“I was in fact a wealthy man.”

He seemed to be saying this more to himself than to me. The chance to respond in the moment evaded me, so I remained silent.

“You should know that I was once wealthy.”

Sensei restated his thought, and this time looked my way with a smile. Even so, I still gave no reply. Or I should say, rather, that I was too unsettled to craft a response. In the meantime, Sensei shifted the conversation elsewhere.

“How is your father doing?”

Since New Year’s, I’d had no further word on my father’s health. The brief notes that accompanied my monthly remittance were in my father’s hand as always, but he rarely made mention of his illness. His writing, though, was steady and sure. There was no sign whatsoever of trembling in the hands, as is common with his type of illness.

“I’ve heard nothing further, so I assume he’s doing all right.”

“I hope that’s the case, but an illness like his is not to be taken lightly.”

“Do you think his time may be near? He seems to be holding on. And he doesn’t mention it in his notes.”

“I see.”

I took Sensei’s questions on my family’s assets and my father’s health as normal conversation -- as a natural voicing of the thoughts that came to his mind. To Sensei, however, these two topics were tightly intertwined, and the connection between them was highly significant. Not having the benefit of his experience, though, I did not know this at the time.