

# WISHING WELL

No man will be a sailor who has contrivance enough to get himself into a jail; for being in a ship is being in a jail, with the chance of being drowned.

Samuel Johnson (ca. 1760)

If you look at the results which science has brought in its train, you will find them to consist almost wholly in elements of mischief.

Thomas Peacock (1875)

In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it. The last is much the worst, the last is a real tragedy!

Oscar Wilde (1892)

It is only to be expected that the recent revolutionary advances of physics are bound to have the most profound effect on our worldview and on our philosophical outlook.

Jan Smuts (1931)

I think that the responsibility for the search for the new synthesis is not for physicists alone.

Carlo Rovelli (1997)

People often have strong emotional responses to questions of the origin of the universe.

Roger Penrose (2004)

Be careful what you wish for.

Anonymous

It's weeks before she actually hires him, or should I say before she tells me that he's hired. Much later I find out *she* is the one who decides his name is Frank. He's likely never thought about the world beginning. Never heard of Dr. Johnson either. Even before he's hired I start to ask myself a Johnson question: Have I got myself into a ship? Every aspect of this job seems odd. Nothing like the research projects I latched onto in the past to keep me surfing. The biggest puzzle is the crazy task she says we're taking on. So from day one a question dangles: What about existing theories? I didn't dare to ask it in the interview. And she didn't ask *me* anything along these lines, which seems a little strange. First day in the office, chairs unpacked and desks assembled, I sit down for the first time and I ask.

Oh, but there *are* none, she says, smiling. None worth mentioning, she goes on, turning to her empty desk, but check it out.

Check it out, I'm soon to find, is her way of sidelining awkward questions. She has others, such as, when she says she is 'affiliated with the Institute' and I ask which one, she switches subjects. She must know I see through this. She's what in my day kids called square, signing L7 with their fingers behind someone's back. Yet she exudes determination, which is something I admire.

In time my job description is a little clearer. I make coffee. I pick up the phone—if it should ever ring. I water the two potted plants and do the research. The first few days are easy, trolling websites, building background. Then she steers me into reading physics, which is heavy going. And history, which is just fine. My research report, which she checks daily. And she wants lists. A strange assortment. Lists of books and lists of problems. Apt and wise quotations and their sources. Shopping lists. Physicists. Philosophers. Poems and poets too. Name dropping—who's who's what she calls it—is encouraged. She also wants a briefing book for this detective. I'm to write it. A case history, she says.

Another affectation, I would say. Of course I don't. Later, she says, when she finds the right detective I can write up his investigation. All this will become some kind of record of the quest. It's daft. Shades of the Red-Headed League? But I'm like Jabez Wilson; it's okay by me. I like writing. No one ever paid me for it, not till now. And having rattled off her list she lets me follow my own train of thought. That's Thomas Hobbes not Mother Mother. I never got to do this since the salad days of college. Liberal Arts—history and literature. A minor in math and computing. Then post-grad philosophy, the 'thesis incomplete,' the surging surf and hip-shot chicks on the unending beaches in the many lands that round off the next decades of my education . . .

So I go along. I pick up the metaphoric pen. The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* says Dr. Johnson is 'arguably the most distinguished man of letters in English history.' He does have a way with words. Maybe he exaggerates a bit about ships of his day but then he isn't really writing about ships, he's writing about *choices*. He has a pessimistic view of human philosophic aspirations. In the flowery fashion of his day he says this too:

O'erspread with Snares the clouded Maze of Fate,  
Where Wav'ring Man, betray'd by vent'rous Pride,  
Then say how Hope and Fear, Desire and Hate,  
To tread the dreary Paths without a Guide;  
As treach'rous Phantoms in the Mist delude,  
Shuns fancied Ills, or chases airy Good.

A warning one might think amid the salad days—two salads in one page, it's

Will—of the apostrophe. And yet our forebears and his too *did* choose to sail in ships in search of rumored lands. They chose and we still choose to tread the dreary paths without a guide. E'er seduced by curiosity, chasing airy Good or driven by the vision of a buck. We too have aspirations. With them we find choices of our own.

So *her* choice is she wants to know: How did it all begin?! Securing this small starting scrap of knowledge is the highest purpose of the human mind. And she chooses *this* to take on with a computer-savvy beach bum and an out-of-work detective trailing in her wake? The sheer effrontery is dazzling. Of course the odds that she can pull it off are zip. Not even!

And now, first task, I am to ask: What if she pulls it off? Then what hopes or hazards might that landfall bring? It's Dr. Johnson: Amidst this foolishness he brings out my didactic style. But, I soon see, she doesn't seem to mind.

What damage, though, I wonder, could we do? Of course at this point I haven't yet met the detective. I don't yet know how truly hopeless it will be. Later she admits she wants this in a book. A real book for publication. About, as she calls it, *The Beginning*. She says it that way, with capitals. I don't know why she thinks some P.I. hack can do the job. Or anybody else. But if he can, if he actually does, I'd have to rank it in the class of dangerous ideas. Like fertilizer mixed with diesel, only worse. Why? Well, they didn't call it the Big Bang for nothing.

So I set out trolling, armed with Google, Johnson's ship in mind, and find that Victor Hugo says, disarmingly, 'Life is a voyage.' Just when and why he says it isn't clear. Nor would I make note of it but trolling further it appears he doesn't stop when that site says he did. He continues (so say several other sites), 'Life is a voyage; the idea is the itinerary.' This brings me back on track because he means we need ideas. But history should teach us that ideas may be perilous. I remember Gruber has his character Wazir explain, 'Ideas cause events.' Indeed they shape the world. No doubt some work to general advantage. Without ideas we would live in caves and even that was an idea. But ideas have a nasty tendency to work to the advantage of a few and disadvantage of the many. Think witches; think slaves; think Pakistan. Think *jihad* or think *perestroika*. Think any bloody idea that has staying power.

The book, she tells me, is to be about philosophy and its pursuit of physics. Two downbeats and for no reason that I can discern she says it's *not* about religion.

Who is she kidding? Whom? Her objective, her *Beginning*, was a pawn of more than one religion long before the early days of Western science. Let's suppose that she succeeds. We succeed, I should say. So we stumble on it. She'd have to be naive to think that no religious sect will use it to advance its own agenda.

She may be a bit dippy but I don't think she's naive. In fact the spillover wouldn't be restricted to religion. The one thing that's certain is the consequences could not be contained. The world would change. Are we ready for this? Rhetorical question. We will never be ready.

She likes this. Watching while she looks it over, I can tell. Not the message; she seems oblivious to content. The style, the tone, of history should teach us that ideas may be perilous. Her demeanor's serious so I don't let her see my snippy bits; Word keeps them under cover. An exposé, she remarks with a big smile as she's leaving, should start off low-key but classy.

So what's with the exposé? Is this a new spin on the project? Digging on the Web I must admit that there may be some sort of story here. At least it's not the now-hear-this they fed us when I was in school. Maybe I could've gotten better grades. This is more like what we *don't* know. I'm madly making lists. Philosophies checklist. Cosmologists checklist. Theories list. Physicists list. Unsolved problems of physics list. Lists of sources of all sorts for everything. Already there are lists of lists of lists. I download LISP which makes it effortless to track them. Especially the problems. Clues she calls them. And then there's this summary, a *CliffsNotes* kind of outline. She says she needs me to feed it to our soon-to-be detective. What can he do with it anyway? Well, that's her problem. It may all be pointless, but classys something that I can arrange.

A century ago, as sole author of relativity and *agent provocateur* of quantum theory, Einstein artlessly unleashes on an unsuspecting world two scientific revolutions. Mentioning as a mere by-product of his first theory the equivalence of mass and energy, he thinks little of the fact that this will usher in the age of atom bombs. At the time maybe he doesn't think of this at all. The bomb is just one of an open-ended string of consequences he (and others) don't expect and can't control. A half century later Heisenberg, in his 'popular' book on quantum theory, is at pains to ponder its impact on 'the religious and philosophical foundations' of human cultures. Blandly, it is true, but he does ponder it. No more than Einstein though does he foresee its impact. Anyroad, which is the way that some say anyway in Britland, by the time he stops to ponder it his quantum horse is long gone from its stable door.

Anyone can turn the world upon its head without a license. No one does impact assessments on ideas. Curiously, of those who put their thoughts on record at the time, it may be Smuts, speaking to the British Association for the Advancement of Science in the interregnum between his two terms as Prime Minister of South Africa, who best apprehends the weight of what's afoot. So what now should we, knowing if not full well then at least much better what *was* afoot, say of it? That it sparked a renaissance of scientific progress? That it founded a new

world economy? That it spawned weapons of mass destruction? That it underwrote the cost of recognizing fundamental human rights? These and a dozen more perspectives voice mere slivers of its impact up to now. Can we cast a better augury than Heisenberg's?

Well, what are we dealing with? Articles I'm reading say the scientific revolution is on pause. Watching her eyes later I see that she reads this simple sentence slowly, twice. Odd. Mostly she just skims. This must matter to her. Why? To me it sounds more than a bit pompous. No, portentous is the word I'm looking for. But she seems to lap it up. Behind all its bountiful activity its (sorry; my own interjection threw me off the thread) the scientific revolution's intellectual engine's parked—they say—in a back alley. Not an unproductive alley. Its very fruitfulness is an attraction for many of the best minds in science. But apparently it's like a fruitful garden that grows mostly mushrooms.

Soon I'm reading physics and it's way beyond my pay scale. Though I have a bit of background it takes half my time to learn the lingo.

The twin theories that drove the revolution now enliven countless kinds of human enterprise. They're enormously successful. But from the perspective of future physics they suffer from a pair of ultimately fatal defects: there are two of them; and they aren't right. It's worse than that. There is a sense afoot that in the grip of these two too-successful, unexplanatory theories, physics may have lost its way.

The Problem of Two Theories is already on my clues list. I don't need a detective to know that it belongs. That there *are* two theories shows that at least one of them must be wrong. In a hundred years neither of them has ripened into *the* theory. Hope fades that either of them ever will. The reason's simple: *The* theory must include and so must be built on the foundation of the way the universe began. Almost everybody says so. If our present enterprise (that is, finding that beginning; who knows what we're really up to) doesn't wholly fail, it might help physics finish off its hundred-year-long revolution. To what ends? Knowing something of the consequences of the start-up of the revolution, should we look for less from its completion?

With no Smuts we can't foreshadow even as generally (no pun; just the right word) as he did the impact of such change. At best perhaps we could expect more of both triumph and disaster. The hopeful calculation is that by being better stewards humankind could tilt the trade-off in the triumph direction.

Actually, I think that's true. Maybe *I'm* naive. But *she's* a snag short of a barbie; she won't discover anything. It's just a job. Don't worry, be happy: McFerrin says it all.

But the impacts could be huge. The choices will be thrust into the hands of

future generations. Should we then embark upon the voyage? Well, the truth is that we have no choice. We never really did. We are the ever-ready victims of our curiosity. Ideas have lives of their own.

Of course it *could* work for the better. In 1965, Arthur C. Clarke says, 'With the expansion of the world's mental horizons may come one of the greatest outbursts of creative activity ever known.'

I say truth is it is a crapshoot. It's all in the way it comes together. A ballet dancer propositions Shaw:

Think of the children (she says). With my beauty and your brains ...

Yes Madam (replies GBS). But what if they have *my* beauty ... ?

This is supposedly my notes. Of course I keep my *own* notes in the markup. She seems to like the stuff she gets to see. More the style than the substance. It's not that she doesn't follow what I'm saying. It's more that she doesn't seem to care. But she seems serious about the writing, about it getting done. I can see it's not just notes. I reckon that she wants this for her book.

Closing up the shop I see a small plaque on her desk:

IF YOU AIN'T THE LEAD DOG  
THE VIEW WILL NEVER CHANGE

Sounds like something Sarah Palin might have said. But nothing that she's said so far is in the least political. What does this saying say of her?