

Chapter 25

Postscript

I should like to close with a few passages and ideas from other authors, beginning with a passage by the Roman statesman and philosopher Seneca the Younger, drawn from Chapter XI of *Of a Happy Life*, written around the 58th year of the Common Era (and as translated into English by Sir Roger L'Estrange in 1685):

How long shall we covet and oppress, enlarge and account that too little for one which was formerly enough for a nation? And our luxury is as insatiable as our avarice. Where is that sea, that forest, that spot of land; that is not ransacked to gratify our palate? The very earth burdened with our buildings; not a river, not a mountain, escapes us. Oh, that there should be such boundless desires in our little bodies! Would not fewer lodgings serve us? We lie in but one, and where we are not, that is not properly. What with our hooks, snares, nets, dogs, etc., we are at war with all living creatures; and nothing comes amiss but that which is either too cheap, or too common; and all this is to gratify a fantastical palate. Our avarice, our ambition, our lusts, are insatiable; we enlarge our possessions, swell our families, we rifle sea and land for matter of ornament and luxury. A bull contents himself with one meadow, and one forest is enough for a thousand elephants; but the little body of a man devours more than all other living creatures. We do not eat to satisfy hunger, but ambition; we are dead while we are alive and our houses are so much our tombs that a man might write our *epitaphs* upon our very doors.

The avarice of man and the heaviness of his presence on the earth is not such a new notion then, after all. Given this, what can one do? Well, it is my hope that the contents of this book show that to change one's own life is not merely a futile gesture, and even though on the scale of a single person all such acts are necessarily insignificant, two more stories may provide solace and encouragement.

The Myth of Sisyphus, an essay by Albert Camus, relates the Greek myth of Sisyphus, a mortal king who dared to put Death himself in chains, and in the underworld was condemned by the Gods to forever roll a great rock up a mountain, only to have it forever tumble back down to the plain. Camus concluded that Sisyphus was the embodiment of the absurd hero, and that "the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy." I have always admired David Simon's particular interpretation of this tale and essay: that to commit to a just cause almost certain to fail is absurd, yet not to commit is also absurd, *but only one choice offers any chance at dignity*.

Finally, Wangari Maathai, founder of the Green Belt Movement and Nobel laureate, in the film *Dirt! The Movie*, related the widely-told children's story of the hummingbird, wherein a forest is being consumed by a huge fire, and all the animals stand by, amazed and overwhelmed.

All except a little hummingbird, who, fast as he can, takes a drop of water from a nearby stream into his beak and drops it on the fire, and back and forth he goes. The other animals, many of whom are much bigger and could help much more, all say “what do you think you can do? You are too little and this fire is too big. Your wings are too little, and your beak too small!” To this, the hummingbird replies, “I am doing the best I can.” And so, Wangari Maathai concludes,

I may feel insignificant, but I certainly don't want to be like the animals watching as the planet goes down the drain. I will be a hummingbird. I will do the best I can.