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The Road to Corbyn

A Modern-Day Pilgrim's Progress

Written by Rob Donovan

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The
Road
to
Corbyn

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A Modern-day Pilgrim's Progress

ROB DONOVAN



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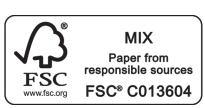
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An Introduction

One night, on my journey through the wilderness of this world, I laid me down to sleep and the likeness of a dream came to me, and behold, I saw men and women and children and they were all suffering.

From the shadows, a man emerged, bent double by the great burden on his back, and he cried out, "What shall I do?" And he began to sob. He was greatly distressed.

In my dream, I watched as a woman gowned in plain white cloth appeared at his side and spoke: "My name is Hope. You know me already. Why do you weep?"

The man bent double by the great burden on his back answered: "When I began to understand that I had an inner me, I was a child. Yet even then, I resolved to understand the world in which I lived. As I grew older I came to realise that all I did had consequences, and all that others did, likewise. I heard many stories about the good and the bad effects of people's actions. I became a seeker after truth, and my name became Pilgrim. I learnt about the visions for a better and kinder world in which people loved one another just as they would wish to be loved by others. But between the idea and the reality, there fell such a shadow."

"This is the story of the world so far," Hope replied. "Do you think this is the way the world ends too?"

"Perhaps. The more I know, the more overwhelming the issues facing us seem. My burden of fear and doubt grows ever heavier, the list of wrongs suffered, of cruelties inflicted, lengthens by the day. I feel I would be deceiving myself if I were to believe anything other than that the best I can hope for is the chance to sit still and lift the burden from my back."

"As a species you are prone to self-deception," Hope said. "I have observed that those who have power and wealth first deceive themselves in order to deceive those they wish to control. Perhaps you, Pilgrim, self-deceive to spare yourself the struggles in the journey ahead of you. But are you ready to abandon the quest for truth and understanding that filled your soul as a child?"

"Your rebuke is warranted," Pilgrim admitted. "But I have become exhausted as the years have passed, and the terrain seems harder. It is as if the world is turning in a new direction that is contrary to what I know would lead to a better age where every person mattered."

"Do not despair. I will show you a special path to take you further on your journey to find truth and understanding. When you need me, I will be there. But first, there is another companion for your journey whom you also know, and she too will be with you when you need her."

In my dream, I watched as Pilgrim rose and picked up his load. Hope remained close by his side. A solitary, bare tree marked the point where they had met. On a bough of this dying tree, there appeared a bird whose colours, crimson red and honey yellow, flamed in the sunlight as the creature swooped towards its perch. Pilgrim met the gaze of the bird, whose name was Charity. The bird spoke.

"You have known me in the past and I will not abandon you, now or ever. The Lady Hope and I will be with you when you need us on your special path – your journey to find truth and understanding."

And in my dream, Pilgrim was suddenly alone by the dying tree beside the dirt track. I watched him as he began to stride forward towards the fully risen sun, now magnificently red, over the horizon at the end of the path that stretched out ahead. Pilgrim's mission had begun.

Pilgrim Meets the Interpreter

In a small clearing in the wood that Pilgrim had entered a few minutes before, following the path down the valley towards the mass of verdant oak before him, he found the path now divided. The Lady Hope appeared beside him.

"Here at this crossroads your journey begins in earnest," she said. "From now to the end of your special path you will need not only the assurance of myself and Charity, but also another voice to guide you. He is the Interpreter. Ask and you will hear. Do not doubt the hearing. Whether you accept his account is for you to decide. He will explain more about your special path. All I will say is that you are being gifted an insight into the history of a relatively small island of which you already have some knowledge. But your journey is undertaken at a time when this island is home to around one in every hundred people who are alive today on your planet. You will see this island's tribal leaders warring with each other, using words as weapons. You will see a conflict of ideas that threaten my death and the extinction of Charity. This is a struggle with which you are already familiar, but you are being graced with a unique perspective as you follow your special path."

With these words, the Lady Hope fell silent and gently faded. Pilgrim felt the cloak of comfort fall over his shoulders. In my dream, I saw him look towards the fork in the path,

undecided. Then it was as if I was Pilgrim, because I too could hear the voice in his head.

"I heard your call and I am here. My name is the Interpreter. I will show you those things that profit your soul and the lives of others, and those things that do not. In that lies my bias. The path you need to take is the one that leads to the most content for the many and the least misery for the few. Let me explain further."

And in my dream, I heard our world reduced to its simplicities.

We, as a species, have evolved from less complex organisms to a point at which it seems we control the world. Our capacity to think and to communicate our ideas, to solve problems that we encounter, to understand and use the elements of the natural world to our advantage, has led to us inhabiting the land on this planet, Earth, in ways which – for some – are ever more knowing. Through the work of those considered the cleverest people, systems of knowledge have been developed in the quite recent past, largely within the last 250 years, that have given members of the species this unprecedented control. These systems of knowledge are the sciences, such as physics and chemistry and engineering. They form worlds of interconnected ideas whose coherence depends on knowing that inside such worlds there will always be predictable outcomes. The application of this scientific knowledge has led to the development of ever more powerful technologies such as steam, electric, nuclear and digital that have transformed the way some of the species live.

Remarkably, and as a consequence of the transformation set in motion by these new technologies, the total number of our species has risen exponentially in this last quarter of

a millennium to reach seven billion people. However, the species has become more divided in status than ever before. Most humans live in poverty, despite the new sciences and technologies. They have very little money, they eat just enough to live, perhaps half of them are often hungry, and hundreds and thousands of them actually die prematurely through starvation.

Yet a quarter of the species do not live in poverty. Their dwelling places are called, collectively, the 'developed world'. The others – the unfortunate and overwhelming majority who do live in poverty – dwell in what is called the 'developing world'. To be precise, since only a small fraction of the population in each country in the 'developing world' has a privileged access to that nation's wealth and power, the majority of people there do not experience a world that is developing in quite the way the adjective may suggest. And to be precise again, since there is also only a relatively small elite in each country in the 'developed world' who have a privileged access to that nation's wealth and power, most people there do not share fully in the fruits of development.

Hunger, starvation and premature death are not features of the 'developed world' by definition but – as the Interpreter took pains to emphasise – in the last forty years there has been a widening of inequalities in those largely northern hemisphere countries that make up the 'developed world'. For increasing numbers of people, there has been a reversal in the advances in living standards over the last two centuries that brought about the idea of a 'developed world' in the first place. The developed world is becoming more unequal too. [1]

The Interpreter paused at this point and looked at Pilgrim.

Could the explanation of the Interpreter in my dream be a deception? Was Pilgrim being fed a diet of lies and half-truths? So far all I had heard seemed factual and credible. The Interpreter's account of a world divided into unequal parts according to the distribution of knowledge, wealth and power had the ring of truth. His next chilling move was to show how this expansion in scientific understanding in the last quarter-millennium had brought such a degree of control over the forces of nature that humanity now had the means to wipe itself off the surface of the planet. Splitting atoms in missile weapon-heads could lead to a nuclear holocaust, destroying virtually all the higher life forms. Two such weapons had already been used in one world war, to devastating effect, at the very beginning of their scientific development, nearly seventy years ago over the centres of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.[2] Fifty years ago, the leaders of the two greatest national power blocs on the planet became locked in conflict over an island and nuclear war was as close as it has ever been.[3] 'Mutually assured destruction' became the grim name for safeguarding against the use of nuclear weapons, or MAD for short. Today, the pattern of international relations and hostilities has changed, but the stockpiles of nuclear weapons remain.

And these nuclear weapons seemed to be addictive. The Interpreter narrowed his focus and spoke specifically about that relatively small island in the developed world that the Lady Hope had said would be the place of Pilgrim's journey to find meaning and truth. It seemed that the political leaders of this island had been among the first to acquire these

nuclear weapons, seventy or so years before. Now, faced with no apparent or likely nuclear threat from another nuclear-armed power, their leaders had decided to renew their nuclear weaponry at the cost of around £100 billion. This they had done at the very time when the country was recovering from an economic crisis that had almost bankrupted the state.[4] Even the Interpreter's calm and matter-of-fact tone seemed stretched at that point in his account.

It was not, however, only the particular advances in nuclear science and applied weapon technologies that threatened to destroy the species. The industrial revolutions that had followed the scientific discoveries and the technological innovations, first in the developed world and then in parts of the developing world, had led to what was now accepted by an overwhelming number of scientists as the phenomenon of global warming. The carbon emissions produced in the powering of industry had accumulated in the atmosphere to such an extent that they were affecting the natural mechanisms for deflecting the intensity of the sun's heat. For the first time, humanity had tilted the delicate balance that sustained its own life on Planet Earth to a point of disequilibrium. The planet was now become hotter, sea levels were rising as icecaps melted – and there was nothing that could be done to stop this; any actions now would only ameliorate these trends, although such actions in themselves were still crucial for the long-term preservation of our civilisations.[5]

The Interpreter's promise to provide an explanation reduced to its simplicities was being fulfilled, but the account was grim and becoming grimmer. Pilgrim remained motionless, seated on the grass by the edge of the dirt track

under the wooden stake that marked the crossroads. Then I heard Pilgrim address the Interpreter:

"You tell of unbelievable and distressing matters that are far from my experience. Yet there is something about these stories that has the ring of truth. I cannot stop myself from wanting to hear more, but all I have heard only adds to my burden of exhaustion. What hope is there? Why should I continue my travels? Why should I proceed any further on this special path that seems to have been prepared for me?"

"My task is to provide an explanation for the shape of the world you will encounter on your journey if you choose to continue on this path," the Interpreter replied. "You have others who will help you answer such questions if you need such assistance. For now, remember the power of your own child-spirit."

Pilgrim rose from the ground, picked up his load and spoke. "I am by nature curious and at my best I believe in good outcomes. I will continue. I shall take the track that points to my left through the wood because my heart and head tell me to do so."

And Pilgrim marched forward.

It was not long before I saw in my dream that Pilgrim had entered a section of the wood in which the branches of the oaks had grown so close together that the path had become almost impenetrable. Pilgrim had no choice but to pause. I could feel the question addressed to the Interpreter forming in his mind even before Pilgrim spoke:

"You tell of a world shaped by industrial and market forces I can scarcely imagine, and you talk of leaders who have wealth and power and some measure of control in that world. I have some understanding of the dangers of wealth

and power, but the paths I have taken in my past have been shaped by a vision of another, better world. I remember a celestial city ruled by a Lord who would free those who find themselves in bondage to sin and despair, and who are only worldly-wise. Is this journey I am now undertaking bound for that same city?" [6]

"My task is to explain only the things of this world as we find it now," said the Interpreter. "I will talk only of what we can reasonably know for sure through observation and enquiry, and not of those matters we may call issues of belief and faith. You have two guides who travel by the names of the Lady Hope and Charity. Yours will be a journey without the support of faith. To be precise, your support will come from your conviction that this journey is worthwhile in your own search to find meaning for yourself and your species in this world. Is that enough?"

Pilgrim thought in silence for a while and then bowed his head in acceptance.

"Now," the Interpreter continued, "you need to understand some ideas and words that have been developed to make sense of this world in which you find yourself. Some of these ideas and words are as slippery as eels. So beware! First, there is a word, an idea, which is a magic term. It can transform itself into its opposite in the hands of magicians who may themselves be unaware that there are forces controlling them. I am talking of the term democracy. I know you have some familiarity with the word. You understand that its origins date back to the world of the Greeks around two and a half thousand years ago. It means 'rule of the people', as opposed to its opposite, aristocracy: 'rule of the elite'. Again, you do not need me to tell you that nothing vexes your species quite

like the issue of rule. 'Who should rule me?' 'Who follows my rule?' When I offer you my explanation for why these eels are so slippery, always bear in mind that it is the issue of ruling which defines these matters: to whom do I give, to whom do I entrust my body and self? Or, more often, to whom do I find myself obliged, under whose rule do I suffer? You may remember that your last special journey took place in a century of revolution. A civil war was fought in which a very small group of radical thinkers set up a democratic state in a community on a hillside and recalled the words of a priest some three hundred years before: 'When Adam delved and Eve span/Who was then the gentleman?' [7] Neither you nor your countrymen then were very keen on such ideas of worldly equality. Perhaps that is why you followed a belief that turned things inside out so that we all became equal in an imagined world?" [8]

Pilgrim remained silent. The Interpreter continued.

"Be that as it may, in the course of the next three to four hundred years those who held power and wealth in this and other nations found themselves challenged by those they ruled. More and more, these challenges were in the name of democracy, in the name of the people. At first, only the most powerful and wealthy of the people who had been excluded from ruling succeeded in these attempts to join the ranks of the few who governed the state. But then the idea that defines democracy today gathered pace. Democracy became the ideal form of government, in which all eligible citizens were able to elect representatives who would act in their interests in making laws and carrying out the government. Political parties were developed that carried the flag for different opinions about how society should

be ruled. Those who were eligible voted to choose their representatives in government, and these representatives were usually members of one or another of these political parties. All those who were ruled, the people, could feel content because they had used a vote to choose their rulers. Having a vote and valuing democracy became the hallmark of those who now believed they were no longer living in an unequal society.

"But who was eligible to vote? The people, of course – but the definition of the people excluded masses of people at the beginning of this movement for democracy. Those who were not regarded as competent adults could not have a vote. Slaves, children, those who had little or no property, women – all were initially excluded. It took many years and much conflict before those who held the power and wealth granted the vote to all men and women over the age of eighteen in the nations of the developed world." [9]

The Interpreter paused and then turned full-face to Pilgrim and asked, "Do you think you will find the people are now the rulers? Will they determine who rules them because they are able to cast a vote?"

"We will see," said Pilgrim. "But from what you say I think that this idea of democracy has been used by those who were excluded from the world of politics, to gain admission. And it seems to me that those who hold wealth and power in this world were forced through conflict and the fear of social unrest to widen the ranks of those within their political nation in the name of this idea called democracy. But I would be surprised if most of the wealth and power did not remain in the hands of the few. This, from my experience, is how it has always been."

"Let me introduce you to two other words, political terms that may deepen your grasp even further," the Interpreter added. "They also have Greek roots. You talk of power being held still by only a few people. Well, the political system where power – and usually wealth too – is held by only a few people is known as an oligarchy. If power is held exclusively by the wealthy to serve their own purposes, then that system has become known as a plutocracy. This system of plutocracy has generally been regarded as a bad thing. Poverty increases and society becomes corrupted by greed. To date, a number of critics have gone as far as identifying the most powerful developed country – not your rather small island, although there are links – as both an oligarchy and a plutocracy in which democracy survives as little more than a smokescreen behind which the most wealthy and powerful set in motion forces that manipulate the masses into a state of collective ignorance of what is really shaping their world.[10] Democracy has been defined in the past as government of the people, by the people, for the people.[11] One thinker has rather aptly described the world of your powerful neighbour as government of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%.[12] Another thinker has estimated that in its population– which is five times bigger than yours – the bottom 70% on the wealth/income scale have really no influence in shaping their society whatsoever. Indeed, this thinker has said that it is only when you get to the very top, to the richest of all, the one tenth of 1% of the population, that you find the people who get what they want and determine the politics of making money.[13] It would be surprising if your land too was not ripe for much the same judgement."

Pilgrim had rested his back, leaning against the trunk of a tree, his load on the ground. He shook his head.

"I am not used to thinking in numbers such as these. The world seems so much more measured than I remember it. But there are limits to this calculation. Even those 1% – or one-tenth of 1% depending on how you measure it – will not always be able to have things all their own way. Total control never seems to me to have lasted for very long. In my experience, on my journeys, there is always space for the slip, for the incalculable, for the accident. Human beings do not always get it right. More often than not, the reverse is true. You talked before of something called global warming that humans have produced through their industrial revolutions. You said that humans could now only soften its impact but not prevent it altering the quality of life for future generations. You talked of a new power called nuclear, and it seemed clear to me that humans are now handling a fire that could wipe them out. How do the richest and most powerful make sense of such fears and the knowledge that not everything can be controlled? Do you think they understand their limitations?"

"When this journey began and the Lady Hope appeared by your side, she spoke of deception," said the Interpreter. "She offered you the idea that those who seek to control you through deception and manipulation must first deceive themselves. She is truly the Lady Hope because she not only understands this truth about human nature, but she also believes there is still a truth beyond deception. No, I do not think the richest and most powerful understand their limitations. They deceive themselves that the control they enjoy now will last forever. It is as if they are in love with the market forces that have shaped the circumstances that have led to their wealth and power. They trust that one way or

another those market forces will always favour them because they are the natural leaders of the world."

"You speak of market forces… It is a term with which I am unfamiliar," Pilgrim admitted.

"The idea of the market is one I know that you understand. Quite soon in their history, human beings began to buy from each other the things they needed but could not themselves grow or make. Humans became buyers and sellers in the marketplace. Soon the market became a place where humans sold their own labour to others for a price. Money was minted to make this buying and selling more straightforward. Humans worked for others to make or grow things and were paid with money, which meant they could go back to the market to buy what they needed. A new force had now entered the world. People began to realise that a profit could be made from such market deals. More money could be made from making sure that the deal was fixed to your advantage. Money and power became inextricably linked. Power was needed to gain the advantage; money helped ensure you had the power. The industrial revolution, which I have already explained, accelerated these market forces in a way that humans have not yet fully grasped. Now there is a marketplace that fills the whole world, a global economy in which those who have fallen in love with money invent ways to make more money, more profit. Money can be made from money. It is commercial alchemy. Every activity, every transaction between humans, can potentially become part of this market.[14] You will see much of this on your journey."

"But surely these market forces will mean your developed world will always seek to have the advantage over the developing world? And won't the rich and powerful always

be striving to keep their wealth and their status at the expense of those who have less?"

"You have already begun to draw your own conclusions about how far the few who have wealth shape what is called democracy. As you consider these matters, remember those things I have explained about oligarchy and plutocracy. Remember also the struggles I mentioned that had to be fought to secure the right to vote in elections for those who were disadvantaged. Wealth and power have been successfully challenged. Market forces have been regulated by elected representatives of people who used their vote to choose governments that did reduce the degree of inequality between fellow human beings…" [15]

The Interpreter paused. In my dream, his words were left suspended in the stillness of my night-world. I wanted to hear more, but I knew I was overcome by the sheer magnitude of what had been explained so far. But Pilgrim rose from the ground and bent down to pick up his burden. As he did so, the boughs that reached around him from all sides seemed to withdraw, and the overgrown and engulfing mass of branches and foliage around him retreated. The path became distinct. The way ahead through the wood was clear.