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—Fred Weldon, University of Montana.



Adventures
in
Human Understanding
Stories for Exploring the Self

John G. Watkins, Ph.D.

Preface by Woltemade Hartman, Ph.D.

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Introduction: Startin' Time

All life is an exploration, right from the start. Some folks believe this beginning occurs when a sperm and an egg cell embrace. Others think it's when we leave the warmth of our mother's womb. Either way, it's "Startin' Time," and the adventures begin. When the cold, cruel air of the delivery room first hits, some of us make loud protest with a cry and vigorous kicking. Everybody is then pleased, and the little bundle of joy begins its life journey by exploring the world, with lips, fingers and feet.

Each adventure brings a new and expanding universe, such as crawling away from mother's watchful gaze or climbing out of the playpen. It's all exciting and largely filled with fun. The more we learn, and the broader our world, the bigger as persons we become.

Many years ago, a very small boy in a very small town had a very big present given him by a very caring father, a teacher. It was the gift of learning how to read—even before he went to school. Fresh vistas were opened. Not only could he grow by personal experiences, but he could also enjoy events lived-through by others.

In a compulsive ecstasy this lad visited the town library, established by a Mr. Carnegie, who had acquired a fortune and was now giving it back before he left for parts unknown.

Each volume in this small collection revealed a new adventure. How exciting! It fired frequent visits (almost one every day). Once kindled, a burning thirst for "knowledge" can never be quenched.

A small telescope brought visions of celestial worlds, and a desire for "wisdom" impelled the boy's later move to academic halls. However, universities teach knowledge, not wisdom. The facts of knowledge are like jigsaw-puzzle bits, pieces that must be connected into meaningful patterns to achieve understanding. Like rain from heaven, wisdom comes not by choice nor by conscious effort, but it may drench us as a by-product of exposure.

As a youth, whose altering physiology diverted attention from outer worlds to inner ones, the science of psychology offered to this young man a new challenge. He wanted to discover what goes on in that little black box, the brain, that determines how humans behave.

Later, as a young teacher, he shared the fears and hopes of hundreds of high school and college students. Finally, as a mental health professional, he combined academic research with listening to many “patients” in hospitals and clinics, who might reveal the secrets of their lives. What they told him constitutes the building blocks for constructing the various stories here inscribed.

Violent and exciting episodes in which the hero foils international villains are popular today. But none of the people who inhabit these tales is a patriotic superman battling evil conspiracies, attempting to overthrow the government, provoke nuclear destruction or enslave the human race. These pages are filled with the experiences of normal people, who doubt, fear, love, hate, strive, triumph or fail in their quest for happiness and meaning. Some of them pursue unrealistic, immature goals. They grasp for money to satisfy excessive greed, or seek to acquire power regardless of consequences to themselves or others. At times, destruction and death result. And some fail because of unjust treatment through no fault of their own. There is no attempt here to make justice prevail simply to please our sense of rightness. Life is not always fair. But the aim throughout this work is to stress a sense of values, one that upholds the essential dignity of mankind.

Not all of the tales have happy endings. Some of our storybook characters acquire wisdom. They pursue lives of contribution and meaning to themselves and others. Perhaps the greatest achievement by some is to understand “love” and the ability to give and receive it with friends, family or life partners. Occasionally, their “friends” are not even human, but nurturing others, called pets.

Our “heroes” range from the exuberance of youth, through the trials of mid-life crises, to those in the autumn of their existence, squeezing the last drop of juice from the fruit of life before winter arrives.

The “Startin’ time” for some described herein was near the turn of the nineteenth century; for others, it was during the mid-decades of the twentieth century, and for some it was more recent still. One, “Dao-Tsai,” centuries ago searched for meaning in his existence—as today we still seek. “Human Nature,” while ever evolving, also remains much the same. The children of yesteryear encountered hope, pain, rejection, striving, success, failure and the proving of self-worth much as we do today. Their experiences are still relevant.

A few of the stories depict real-life experiences of the characters. Some tales are partly true and partly fictional, while others are the product of imagination which have been constructed about the lives of people who impacted the writer as associates, friends, students and patients. In these cases, events may have been altered or names and circumstances changed to protect their privacy. But the abiding criterion for inclusion is that each should in some way offer an “adventure in human understanding,” one to which a reader might relate.

The stories are interspersed with brief essays and poems that amplify our search for human understanding. Finally, since many of the life problems here depicted involve unconscious as well as conscious motivations, brief “Thoughts of a Therapist” have been added. These analyses-and-comments sections aim to provide rationales as a therapist or psychoanalyst might evaluate the characters and their situations.

When “Quittin’ Time” finally comes, perhaps we can see it as only leaving one global playpen for a fresh and larger challenge, an exciting new exploration. Among all those who have gone before, none has come back, so we do not know what is there. We may hope and wish for a paradise filled with pleasure or to avoid a nether region of pain. But maybe our existence simply merges into a universal ocean of life energy—a view that many would protest. At least we know that each of us must first return to our own “Startin’ Time,” the bosom of Mother Earth. But why should this be filled with fears and tears? It just might be the beginning of an exciting new adventure.

Chapter 7

The Novel

She was standing on the front porch, shouting a little louder than usual, “Joseph, have you got your raincoat?”

“I won’t need it today, Mom.”

“Oh yes, you will. I just heard the weatherman predicting rain storms this afternoon.”

“Oh—kay,” muttered Joseph, resentfully turning off the car key and returning to pick up his raincoat. After watching him drive off, his mother returned to the kitchen telephone.

“You still there, Margaret? That boy is so forgetful. Most of the time he does what he’s supposed to, but occasionally he shows a stubborn streak—got it from his Dad. Now he has the crazy idea of making a train trip through Europe. I told him he should wait, then he and Mercedes could go together on their honeymoon.”

“She’s such a nice girl,” volunteered Margaret.

“Yup!” replied Joseph’s mother. “That girl’s got a good head on her. She’ll keep him in line, and I won’t have to keep reminding him all the time.”

Mom often talked to her best friend, Margaret, after Joseph left for work each morning. Later, she would muse to herself while washing the dishes: “Wouldn’t it be nice if he would return to the seminary and complete his Doctor of Divinity degree? He could be ordained by the Church.” She could almost see that sign in front of it: “Oaksdale First Methodist Church, Rev. Joseph Witherspoon, Pastor.” The present minister was getting old. Folks said he would retire soon. Joseph and Mercedes could be married and then move into the parsonage, only two blocks down the street.

She had mentioned to Dick, her husband, how nice it would be to have them so close. They could visit their grandchildren every day. Dick agreed—but seemed somewhat hesitant.

Joseph had held a job as Counselor at a local employment service for three years, and he was good at it. However, life in the Witherspoon household was humdrum and uneventful until Joseph suddenly informed his mother he wanted a vacation and had signed up for this European tour. Being pushed for a reason, he had merely said, “I just want a little excitement before settling down.”

This made no sense to Mom, but she realized that when he got in one of his “stubborn streaks” there was no use arguing with him. She also knew that in time he would feel guilty and come around to her way of thinking.

Joseph was regarded in the community as a reliable, but rather dull fellow. Solid, conscientious—never missed a day at the office. He seemed reconciled to bachelorhood, and lived at home. Most girls found him uninteresting. There was only Mercedes, his childhood sweetheart, with whom he occasionally went to the movies.

Five years earlier, at his mother’s request, he had enrolled in a theological seminary, but after two semesters dropped out, entered graduate school, and completed a Master’s degree in social work at the State University. Somewhat reconciled that at least he was in a helping profession, Mom had decided to postpone pushing for the Doctor of Divinity degree. There would be time later.

As an undergraduate Joseph had been attracted to romantic literature and had secret hopes of being a writer. In fact, he had been quietly working on a novel with visions of making the *New York Times* bestseller list, but had struggled for several weeks now to develop a satisfactory ending to its plot.

At State College, on the other side of Missouri, Madonna Heathcott taught English composition and literature. A tall, dark-haired, vivacious young woman with a sparkle in her eyes, she enjoyed making her students laugh when describing risqué tales of the Renaissance. While most women instructors were

rather dowdy, Madonna appeared in outfits that were both brilliant-colored and daring. Dean Mathilda Grossmeyer, the gray-haired matriarch of the College, didn't quite approve of her. But what can you do when Madonna attracted enthusiastic enrollments in all her classes?

There were few unmarried men in their thirties at the school. But lacking any available alternative, she had become engaged to marry Kurt, the physics professor. Unbeknownst to him, however, she had planned to treat herself to a "fling" this summer. She would take a trip through Europe on the Orient Express before returning for the marriage. Kurt was not very supportive when she informed him of her decision.

"Listen, Madonna, what's this trip all about? I can't have you traipsing around overseas. We're engaged and supposed to get married. If you're going to be my wife, you'll have to straighten up and meet your obligations. I'd never permit my lab assistant to be so lackadaisical."

"Kurt, we're not married yet, and you can't push me around," announced Madonna.

Kurt was the best teacher in the college. He knew it and prided himself in spending much time preparing his lectures. Glowering, he retreated to his office.

Sometimes Madonna would bristle when he tried to control her behavior or personal views. She had determined to be her own person. However, after each brief quarrel she and Kurt usually reconciled and resumed their up-and-down relationship—which, of course, was aimed at marriage.

Madonna had been raised in a middle-class home where her mother was affectionate but not strong. Her father was a handsome man, rather dashing, admired by women, who made his living as a wholesale representative for a machine-products firm. This position required that he travel much of the time.

As a child she had worshipped him, and he returned her affection. In the family she was known as "Daddy's little girl." However,

when she was thirteen he left the family after developing an affair with another woman, whom he had met on a business trip. His abandonment devastated Madonna. She felt that men could not be trusted. They would leave you. This conviction was reinforced by a few affairs she had in college with boyfriends. She had slept once with each, only to find that afterward they had no further interest in her. Accordingly, when she felt attracted toward a man she would withdraw into a passive neutrality that hid her underlying needs for warmth, affection, and closeness. She could seem to be energized in a non-emotional conversation, making her date feel important, even though she was not attracted to him. Several such relationships had come and gone.

Prospects of marriage dimmed until she began teaching at the same college as Kurt and decided he would make an acceptable husband. At least they did have their academic careers in the same institution. He would not be chasing other women and probably would never abandon her. She could feel safe with Kurt. However, there was always something missing. She just wasn't sure. This would be her last "fling" before getting married and settling down.

When Madonna opened the exterior compartment door of the train in Budapest she found she would be sharing it with a mild, neatly-appearing young fellow. Her first misgivings about being alone with this man were resolved when he was very courteous and lifted her bags to the overhead rack.

Madonna looked him over without appearing to do so. Well-dressed, dark suit, clean-cut features, blond, neatly-combed hair, tall, athletic build. He reminded her of somebody, but she couldn't decide just whom.

"Hm."

He seemed rather shy. Nothing much was said between them as the train slowly wound around the many curves in the track between Budapest and Vienna.

In *Adventures in Human Understanding* the story is revealed as a therapeutic tool—the medium by which lessons may be learned and persist in the memory; and the medium that provides metaphors for life, gleaning meaning from our experiences.

Leading clinical psychologist John G. Watkins, Ph.D. has embodied his extensive knowledge of the mind in the “adventures in human understanding” gathered in this book. Arranged into four sections that address the four stages of life, each story is followed by a psychological analysis, ensuring that *Adventures in Human Understanding* will be an effective instrument for facilitating therapy, as well as an enjoyable source of stories for everyone.

John G. Watkins, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus of the University of Montana, is world renowned as a pioneering psychologist, particularly in the areas of hypnosis, dissociation and multiple personality. He was a founder and past president of ISCEH, an international society in hypnosis. He has been the president of the Society for Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis (SCEH), of the American Board of Psychological Hypnosis, and of Division 30 (Hypnosis) of the American Psychological Association. Dr. Watkins has also served as clinical editor of the *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis*. He has lectured all over the world, and authored many groundbreaking books and articles on hypnosis and psychotherapy, making him one of the leading theorists in the field.

“Dr. John Watkins is a master storyteller. His *Adventures in Human Understanding* rivets the reader’s attention until the last page is turned. These fictional short “stories for exploring the self” are rich in human drama and deeply resonate with our own understanding of how we humans strive throughout our lives to grow and become whole. Dr. Watkins writes with joy, humor, insight, and wisdom about the struggles of people of all ages from “startin’ time” to “quittin’ time.” With a light touch and a deep love, he invites us all to share with him this dance of life.”

—Peter B. Bloom, M.D., *Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine.*



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