"Mr. Tayer," by Jean Houston

When I was about fourteen I was seized by enormous waves of grief over my parents' breakup. I had read somewhere that running would help dispel anguish, so I began to run to school every day down Park Avenue in New York City. I was a great big overgrown girl (5 feet eleven by the age of eleven) and one day I ran into a rather frail old gentleman in his seventies and knocked the wind out of him. He laughed as I helped him to his feet and asked me in French- accented speech, "Are you planning to run like that for the rest of your life?"

"Yes, sir" I replied. "It looks that way."

"Well, Bon Voyage!" he said.

"Bon Voyage!" I answered and sped on my way.

About a week later I was walking down Park Avenue with my fox terrier, Champ, and again I met the old gentleman.

"Ah." he greeted me, "my friend the runner, and with a fox terrier. I knew one like that years ago in France. Where are you going?"

"Well, sir." I replied, "I'm taking Champ to Central Park."

"I will go with you." he informed me. "I will take my constitutional."

And thereafter, for about a year or so, the old gentleman and I would meet and walk together often several times a week in Central Park. He had a long French name but asked me to call him by the first part of it, which was "Mr. Tayer" as far as I could make out.

The walks were magical and full of delight. Not only did Mr. Tayer seem to have absolutely no self-consciousness, but he was always being seized by wonder and astonishment over the simplest things. He was constantly and literally falling into love. I remember one time when he suddenly fell on his knees, his long Gallic nose raking the ground, and exclaimed to me, "Jeanne, look at the caterpillar. Ahhhh!" I joined him on the ground to see what had evoked so profound a response that he was seized by the essence of caterpillar. "How beautiful it is", he remarked, "this little green being with its wonderful funny little feet. Exquisite! Little furry body, little green feet on the road to metamorphosis." He then regarded me with equal delight. "Jeanne, can you feel yourself to be a caterpillar?"

"Oh yes." I replied with the baleful knowing of a gangly, pimply faced teenager.

"Then think of your own metamorphosis." he suggested. "What will you be when you become a butterfly, une papillon, eh? What is the butterfly of Jeanne?" (What a great question for a fourteen-year-old girl!) His long, gothic, comic-tragic face would nod with wonder. "Eh, Jeanne, look at the clouds! God's calligraphy in the sky! All that transforming. moving, changing, dissolving, becoming. Jeanne, become a cloud and become all the forms that ever were."

Photo was not included in story

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Or there was the time that Mr. Tayer and I leaned into the strong wind that suddenly whipped through Central Park, and he told me, “Jeanne, sniff the wind." I joined him in taking great snorts of wind. “The same wind may once have been sniffed by Jesus Christ (sniff). by Alexander the Great (sniff), by Napoleon (sniff), by Voltaire (sniff), by Marie Antoinette (sniff)!” (There seemed to be a lot of French people in that wind.) “Now sniff this next gust of wind in very deeply for it contains.. . Jeanne d’Arc! Sniff the wind once sniffed by Jeanne dArc. Be filled with the winds of history."

It was wonderful. People of all ages followed us around, laughing—not at us but with us. Old Mr. Tayer was truly diaphanous to every moment and being with him was like being in attendance at God’s own party, a continuous celebration of life and its mysteries. But mostly Mr. Tayer was so full of vital sap and juice that he seemed to flow with everything. Always he saw the interconnections between things—the way that everything in the universe, from fox terriers to tree bark to somebody’s red hat to the mind of God, was related to everything else and was very, very good.

He wasn’t merely a great appreciator, engaged by all his senses. He was truly penetrated by the reality that was yearning for him as much as he was yearning for it. He talked to the trees, to the wind, to the rocks as dear friends, as beloved even. ‘Ah, my friend, the mica schist layer, do you remember when...?” And I would swear that the mica schist would begin to glitter back. I mean, mica schist will do that, but on a cloudy day?! Everything was treated as personal, as sentient, as “thou." And everything that was thou was ensouled with being. and it thou-ed back to him. So when I walked with him, I felt as though a spotlight was following us, bringing radiance and light everywhere. And I was constantly seized by astonishment in the presence of this infinitely beautiful man, who radiated such sweetness, such kindness.

I remember one occasion when he was quietly watching a very old woman watching a young boy play a game. “Madame", he suddenly addressed her. She looked up, surprised that a stranger in Central Park would speak to her. “Madame,” he repeated, “why are you so fascinated by what that little boy is doing?” The old woman was startled by the question, but the kindly face of Mr. Tayer seemed to allay her fears and evoke her memories. “Well, sir,” she replied in an ancient but pensive voice, “the game that boy is playing is like one I played in this park around 1880, only it’s a mite different." We noticed that the boy was listening, so Mr. Tayer promptly included him in the conversation. “Young fellow, would you like to learn the game as it was played so many years ago?”

“Well. . .yeah. sure, why not?” the boy replied. And soon the young boy and the old woman were making friends and sharing old and new variations on the game—as unlikely an incident to occur in Central Park as could be imagined.

But perhaps the most extraordinary thing about Mr. Tayer was the way that he would suddenly look at you. He looked at you with wonder and astonishment joined to unconditional love joined to a whimsical regarding of you as the cluttered house that hides

the holy one. I felt myself primed to the depths by such seeing. I felt evolutionary forces wake up in me by such seeing, every cell and thought and potential palpably changed. I was yeasted, greened, awakened by such seeing, and the defeats and denigrations of adolescence redeemed. I would go home and tell my mother, who was a little skeptical about my walking with an old man in the park so often, “Mother, I was with my old man again, and when I am with him, I leave my littleness behind." That deeply moved her. You could not be stuck in littleness and be in the radiant field of Mr. Tayer.

The last time that I ever saw him was the Thursday before Easter Sunday, 1955. I brought him the shell of a snail. “Ah. Escargot." he exclaimed and then proceeded to wax ecstatic for the better part of an hour. Snail shells, and galaxies, and the convolutions in the brain, the whorl of flowers and the meanderings of rivers were taken up into a great hymn to the spiralling evolution of spirit and matter. When he had finished, his voice dropped, and he whispered almost in prayer, “Omega ...omega. . .omega.." Finally he looked up and said to me quietly, "Au revoir, Jeanne”.

“Au revoir, Mr. Tayer,” I replied, “I’ll meet you at the same time next Tuesday."

For some reason. Champ, my fox terrier didn’t want to budge, and when I pulled him along, he whimpered, looking back at Mr.Tayer, his tail between his legs. The following Tuesday I was there waiting where we always met at the corner of Park Avenue and 83rd Street. He didn’t come. The following Thursday I waited again. Still he didn’t come. The dog looked up at me sadly. For the next eight weeks I continued to wait, but he never came again. It turned out that he had suddenly died that Easter Sunday but I didn’t find that out for years.

Some years later, someone handed me a book without a cover which was titled The Phenomenon of Man. As I read the book I found it strangely familiar in its concepts. Occasional words and expressions loomed up as echoes from my past. When, later in the book, I came across the concept of the “Omega point." I was certain. I asked to see the jacket of the book, looked at the author’s picture, and, of course, recognized him immediately. There was no forgetting or mistaking that face. Mr. Tayer was Teilhard de Chardin, the great priest-scientist, poet and mystic, and during that lovely and luminous year I had been meeting him out side the Jesuit rectory of St. Ignatius where he was living most of the time.

I have often wondered if it was my simplicity and innocence that allowed the fullness of Teilhard’s being to be revealed. To me he was never the great priest-paleontologist Pere Teilhard. He was old Mr. Tayer. Why did he always come and walk with me every Tuesday and Thursday, even though I’m sure he had better things to do? Was it that in seeing me so completely, he himself could be completely seen at a time when his writings, his work, were proscribed by the Church, when he was not permitted to teach, or even to talk about his ideas? As I later found out, he was undergoing at that time the most excruciating agony that there is—the agony of utter disempowerment and psychological crucifixion. And yet to me he was always so present—whimsical, engaging, empowering. How could that be?

I think it was because Teilhard had what few Church officials did—the power and grace of the Love that passes all understanding. He could write about love being the evolutionary force, the Omega point, that lures the world and ourselves into becoming, because he experienced that love in a piece of rock, in the wag of a dog's tail, in the eyes of a child. He was so in love with everything that he talked in great particularity, even to me as an adolescent, about the desire atoms have for each other, the yearning of molecules, of organisms, of bodies, of planets, of galaxies, all of creation longing for that radiant bonding, for joining, for the deepening of their condition, for becoming more by virtue of yearning for and finding the other. He knew about the search for the Beloved. His model was Christ. For Teilhard de Chardin, Christ was the Beloved of the soul.

Years later, while addressing some Jesuits, a very old Jesuit came up to me. He was a friend of Teilhard's—and he told me how Teilhard used to talk of his encounters in the Park with a girl called Jeanne.

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