

## **Encounter with Mr Tayer in Central Park, NY**

*by Jean Houston*

*Copied from "The Enlightened Life", edited by Subhodi Institute, Sri Lanka, issue 17 dated September 2014.*

When I was about fourteen, I used to run down Park Avenue in New York City, late for high school. I was a great big overgrown girl, (five 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.

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

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

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

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

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 he suddenly fell on his knees, his long Gallic nose raking the ground, and exclaimed to me:

"Jeanne, look at the caterpillar. Ahhhhh!"

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 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, un papillon, eh? What is the butterfly of Jeanne?"

(what a great question for a fourteen-years-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 forms that ever were."

And 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 have once 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 the wind.) "Now sniff this next gust of wind very deeply, for it contains... JEANNE D'ARC! Sniff the wind once sniffed by Jeanne d'Arc. 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 mystery. 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 who was 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, the wind, to the rocks as dear friends, as beloveds 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 thouded back to him. So when I walked with him, I felt as though a spotlight was following us, bringing radiance and light everywhere.

I remember another 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 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 can be imagined).

But perhaps the most extraordinary thing about Mr Tayer was the way 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 felt greened, awakened by such seeing, and 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 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 meandering of rivers were taken up into a great hymn to the spiraling 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 alone, he whimpered, looking back at Mr Tayer, his tail between his legs.

The following Tuesday, I was waiting where we always met, at the corner of Park Avenue and 83<sup>rd</sup> 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 out for years.

Some years later, someone handed me a book without a cover titled *The Phenomenon of Man*. As I read the book I found its concepts strangely familiar. 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. During that lovely and luminous year I had been meeting him outside the Jesuit rectory of St Ignatius, where he was living at the time.