



Fables and Reflections

Four

Not so long ago, a travelling salesman came to the conclusion that, for whatever reason - his looks, his wares, the nature of the area he was travelling, the mood of the times - he was not going to win custom. Not a single door had opened to him. None would.

He was exhausted and depressed. All these great houses ! These peaceful and beautiful gardens ! And the maddening sense of these people's power and established position in the world ! All he needed to set himself up was here, somewhere, behind one of these doors.

And he, in contrast. Footsore, downtrodden, trying in any way he knew to say the right catch-words and slogans quickly enough to stop the door from slamming in his face, to smile warmly enough to stop the house-child from throwing a stone at him, to walk with self-assurance enough to stop the house-dog from nipping his ankles or peeing on his shoe.

He had something of urgency, of burning importance to offer, but of course, as he became more and more depressed, as he felt more and more vividly the contrast between his Have-not and their Have, his dearth and their surplus, as he experienced more and more painfully his dependence on something behind a door he had no power to open - so the worse became his selling performance and the more hopeless his prospects.

Something had to change. To continue in the same vein led nowhere except a bitter death beyond his own. Any change, however startling, however risky, had more prospect of success than remaining as he was.

So he asked himself, what is the worst aspect for me of my present position ? And can I change it?

His answer was : the worst aspect is my sense of powerlessness, my conviction which destroys my soul, that all I need to flourish is behind someone else's locked door.

And, yes. I can change it. I will change it..

So he went away and spent the last of his money on some cheap battening, some nails and some pitch. He quickly returned, struggling under the weight of all these materials, and began to build a stall on the nearest street corner. When it was finished, he stood back and looked it over. It was tiny and fragile. He was proud of it. He had constructed a doorway others might enter.

He got inside, set out his wares and waited for the police to arrest him for obstruction, for council officials to harass him for contravening a variety of bye-laws, for the dogs of the neighbourhood to adopt his stall as their lavatory, for the outraged neighbours to come running from their rich houses to drive him away.

Three children passed his stall on their mountain bikes, each the last word in expensive bike technology. 'Hey' they shouted. 'That's a nice house Can we come in?'

A woman drove by on her way home from the supermarket. She stopped the car. 'What are you selling? Oh, now, that does look a bit special! How charmingly authentic and one-off! Don't go away! I'll be right back with some cash!'

In the evening, several men paraded in a file from the tube station, swinging their umbrellas, clutching their mobiles, loosening their ties - and when they saw the flimsy little stall they all gathered round in an excited cluster.

'That looks really rather amusing,' one said.

'What fun' said another.

'Can we join in?' asked a third. 'Something to do at the week-end and all that.'

Soon there was a small stall at every street corner in the neighbourhood. Every street held a weekly street party.

As for the salesman, he grew wings. No dog ever peed on him again.

Afterword

If what you have to offer has real value, then it is badly needed. You have no right to lose heart. In times of fear, dismay, defensiveness and dislocation, your own resources are your greatest asset and the unexpected is everyone's best hope. Do not be afraid. Build just here, in this place where you are. It is the best place. Hurry.