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Chapter 3: "A Sample Dialogue" refers to the paragraph numbers in this appendix; however, page numbers may not match exactly.

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The Roman System

You and I, all of us, Curia and hierarchy alike, are the nearly perfect products of our Roman system. We never fought it. We marched with it every step of the way. We cauterized our emotions, hardened our hearts, made ourselves eunuchs for the love of God . . . and somewhere along the way, very early I think, we lost the simple art of loving. We bind heavy and insupportable burdens on men's backs and we ourselves lift no finger to ease them! So, the people turn away: not to strange gods, as we think; not to orgies and self-indulgence . . . but in search of simplicities which we, the custodians, censors, and governors, have obscured from them. If an honest, open, brave man sat in the chair of Peter and thought first, last and always of the people, there might be a chance. There just might be.

Morris West, Lazarus

- 1 We have not read the novel from which that passage is taken, but, thanks to one Kit Reed, an astute reviewer for the *Inquirer* of Philadelphia, we may not have to. He has quoted the passage above, in which a very senior cleric speaks to a sick pope, and we suspect that he has shown us the very heart of the book, which is also the heart of other things.

- 2 We look now at Aeneas. He was a great hero of the Trojan war, and did quite well thereafter too, even though he fought on the losing side. We watch him making his escape, wading through the surf out to where his ships and men are waiting. He carries his crippled old father piggyback, and leads his young son by the hand. An exemplary father. His wife did not make it out of the burning city, where the victorious Greeks are gathering up booty and women and setting fire to whatever they can't use.
- 3 Aeneas's father, Anchises, once, in his youth, got to spend a whole night with the saucy and sexy goddess, Aphrodite. (It was her idea—he was just lucky.) But he made a big mistake the next morning when the dawn was breaking. He got a good look at the goddess, and, as punishment for that blasphemous glimpse, his legs were blasted: he never walked again. But he was never heard to complain.
- 4 The little boy is named Ascanius. Well, that's one of his names. He has another name, and a very interesting one. Most of what we have heard about Aeneas was told to us long ago by the Roman poet Virgil. Virgil was seriously patriotic. Piously patriotic, in fact. For him, the massive, sprawling Roman Empire was the greatest and noblest creation of the mind of man. It was the ultimate work of the fine art of civilization. And so it is that Virgil chooses to call the little boy Julius. He intends to make some connection between Aeneas's son Ascanius and the mighty Julius Caesar. It was Caesar who did what most men love to see done. He put lots of smaller things together into one big and complicated thing.
- 5 Aeneas, of course, isn't the bringer of civilization. There was civilization long before there was a Rome. But he is, or at least he can conveniently stand for, the bringer of the latest, and perhaps the last possible, refinement of civilization—the utterly inaccessible and unaddressable inhuman monster of the Roman System: the all-encompassing bureaucracy of laws and rules and guidelines and channels and standard operating procedures. Where this monster dwells, there are no persons, only its agents. But where it rules, and perhaps only where it rules, there can be pax of the romana kind, but that is the best it can do.
- 6 Now Virgil's poem begins with a famous first line. Lots of people who know no other Latin at all know this line: *Arma virumque cano* : I sing of arms and the man. Old time poets, even when they were writing very slowly and carefully, liked to fancy themselves as bards, strumming away on their lyres and singing along. And of what did they sing, who sang the Iliad and the Odyssey and other such beyond counting? They all seem to have sung of the very same things. Arms and a man. They were not ashamed. But it is an admission that tells us something that we really do know but seldom think about: that if "civilization" is to exist at all, and if a great bureaucracy is to arise and to prevail, then some strong person has to bring it about by force.

- 7 Aeneas will go aboard and sail off into adventure after adventure. Anchises will die on the trip, but Aeneas will visit his shade in the Underworld, where he will be given his license, as it were, assured that he is the chosen creator of the Great System that Rome will become. In all of his trials and travels, he will be helped by Aphrodite, his doting mother. And, thanks to her, he will establish once and for all not simply the Great System of the Empire of Rome, amazing as that is, but the Great System of Men and Their Ways.
- 8 He is, after all, a Real Man. He is strong and combative. He loves winning. He has bigger and better things to do than to hang around with Dido. She is only a queen, only a woman. He has a great destiny to fulfill. He has to become the progenitor of customs inspectors and license bureau clerks. He must father forth not only Big Government, with its concentric circles beyond counting of flunkies and sub-flunkies with titles, but also Big Religion, with its popes and its pardoners, with its decretals and bulls, with its endless labyrinths of discipline and doctrine, and its power. And, at only one tiny remove, he must engender also Big Business, Big Bread and Circuses, and, most to the point for us, Big School. And, taken all together, those things add up to something more than mere civilization: Big Civilization, maybe, or certainly modern civilization as we have come to know and love it. And we do love it. We really do.
- 9 The word "civilization" means something like "citified," gathered together in one place, usually one protected place, and observing, whether you like it or not, one set of rules. On balance, most of us like it a lot. It will prevent us, once in a while, from doing unto others what we would really like to do, but it also prevents others from doing unto us what they would like to do. It's a pretty fair deal, and so fair indeed that we cannot imagine life without it as anything except ugly and brief, as Hobbes did in a line that is now so famous that we assume its truth without asking for evidence, which is lucky for Hobbes, since there isn't any. Just like Hobbes, we always presume that those few specimens of miserable savages who can still be found must be well-preserved examples of what we all once were. It never occurs to us that those people are just as old as we, and that what we see in them now could for all we know be the result not of some failure to learn civilization but of millennia of degeneration, by which we might also explain our own present condition. And we do believe those After the Holocaust movies in which hairy motorcyclists become barons and kings. Mostly, therefore, we are very glad that civilization came to be, and that modern soft and liberal civilization came along to discover the absence of God and thus to take away the power of those nasty kings who claimed their licenses from God. We are not at all ungrateful to the arms and the strong men who brought civilization upon us.

10 Most thoughtful people could probably imagine the coming of civilization for themselves and not be too far wrong. There is, however, an interesting old Babylonian myth that tells the story.

11 Did the Babylonians believe this story? That is, did they suppose that its events "really happened," and that they are what you would have seen had you been there? I don't know. I suspect that some did, and I doubt that it did them any harm. But I'm pretty sure that many of them, and probably even the priests who wrote them down for us, didn't actually believe them as fundamentalists would believe. There is believing and there is believing. It is one thing to believe that these and these events really took place, and quite another to believe that if they didn't take place, well, maybe they should have—it would explain a lot.

12 Lots of myths and stories are like that. To see some point in Macbeth, and to take some thought because of it, we are not at all required to believe that there really was a Macbeth and that he really did exactly these things. The story is not an account of the fact. It is, or is trying to be, an account of the truth. It is for us to judge about truth, and whatever judgment you make about the truth in Macbeth is your business. You can change it later. Good. That's also your business, and you have all that it takes to do that business—an always growing human mind, and the always growing experience of living in the world and thinking about it.

13 Now, with the same tools, make some judgment of the truth of an old, old story:

14 In the beginning, the Mother of us all was alone. She created a mate for herself and set about the business of having a family. She gave birth to a litter of gods and goddesses, and they in turn did likewise, until at last they became a great swarm. Unlike our Mother, who, having populated Heaven, was content simply with being, these divinities decided that they preferred doing .

15 So they started doing things. They held fancy-dress parties and drank. They married, and slept around, too. They quarreled, and, not content with quarreling over personal things, they created yet other things to quarrel over. In some versions, they created us and the Earth on which we live, and at once fell to quarreling over who should be in charge of what and why. At last, things got so bad that our Mother, far, far away and little concerned with the doings of the busy, busy gods and goddesses, noticed that there was lots of noise. The harmony of the eternal was being disturbed.

16 She consulted with her mate, and he, a quiet, thoughtful chap, agreed that she was right. Those noisy and unruly godlets would have to go. The whole idea had been a mistake. But they had by now developed so much power of their own that it might be not so easy to send them back into the oblivion from which they had come. So our

Mother created a monster, a fabulous beast powerful enough to do away with the whole disorderly rabble.

17 Word of this spread quickly among the divinities. Whole banqueting tables fell silent. Picnics were called off. The gods and goddesses were terrified, for they knew that their Mother, of whom they hardly ever thought, was very powerful, and that her tame monster probably could destroy them all. In their despair, they turned to the one member of their numerous company who seemed, maybe, just powerful enough to save them. His name was Marduk, and he was big and strong. Furthermore, he was heavily armed. He carried, always, even at parties and in other godly activities, numerous weapons, and he knew how to use them. The divinities went to see him and asked him to take the field all alone against the Mother's avenging beast.

18 He thought about it for a while. Well, he said, I think I could lick that serpent, of course, but I'm not so sure that it would be worth my while. After all, look at the way we live. Is that really worth saving? We are, you must confess, exactly the disorderly rabble that our Mother thinks us. So how about this? Let's make a deal right here and now. I will go forth and slay the beast, but only if you will all swear to me, in the holiest of holy vows, that when I come back we will get ourselves in order. And that means that there has to be one boss and only one boss--me. When the threat is past, you will all obey me, and I will be in charge of everything. Some of my powers, of course, I will hand out here and there among you, but everything that you do will be finally subject to my approval. I'm going to make some rules, and you are going to follow them. Anyone who disobeys will soon discover that he might have been more gently dealt with by that serpent. And this arrangement will last forever and ever. Amen. There's my deal. So how about it?

19 No one has to tell you how the story comes out. You know. Why do you know? Because Marduk's deal is a description of the way we live in this life. Sure, Marduk is here and there replaced, as in our case, by the laws and the constitution, as he was even in the Athens of Socrates. But even the laws and the constitution can survive only if there is some power standing behind them, a power that can and will defend them by force. Marduk, having been only one of numerous gods, becomes God. At the same time he invents civilization. He begins the Roman System, and every institution under whose shadow we all live. And it all depends on power.

20 Children would love this story. They already know about Marduk, but they, always looking over their shoulders for that invincible dragon, can not see in the usurper an arrogant bully who seizes the chance to tyrannize over a pack of scoundrels weaker than he. They must see him rather as the super-hero, the defender of the weak. They have to believe that the weak are right and the strong unjust. But alas, it is only

the strongest of the strong who can save them, so that they also must believe in the rightness of strength itself. This is why it is vain to imagine that little boys can be brought to hate war and to put aside toy Uzis and ray guns. Comfortable middle-class Americans and their subsidized future-bright children in college can suppose themselves virtuous enemies of war by bumper-sticker, but Kurdish tribesmen and black South Africans know that their hope is in the strength to do violence and get away with it.

21 To whom was the tale of Marduk told when it was very young, if it ever was? The answer is probably, Everybody. It is unlikely that ordinary citizens of Babylon checked out the tablets and brought them home to read. It is unlikely, in fact, that more than a small handful of specialists ever read it at all. It was surely told, as stories are told to this day in that part of the world, by tale-tellers in the streets. And they surely did what any good teller of tales will do—they made it better every time. More details, more dialogue, more gestures and tones of voice. No doubt, the teller who came up with a particularly gruesome description of the serpent held on to it, just as he would hold on, once he had perfected it, to the style of delivery and tone of voice by which Marduk is able to keep the others from stumbling on their best chance to alter the deal by pointing out that even without their concessions he would do better to fight the serpent, which was going to destroy him as well.

22 How could they have missed it? Were they stupid? Were they too frightened to think straight? Is Marduk taking advantage of them either because he is cunning, or because he really is better and braver than any of them and actually worthy to rule them? What interesting questions! What an interesting concept that is: Worthy to rule over others. Can we imagine some other set of the mind, something other than the Roman System, in which we would think it both preposterous and wicked that any person should rule over another?

23 Somewhere or other, Thoreau speculates as to the future of democracy. He sees in the history of humanity, a continuous progress out of tyranny and into freedom, each step taking us a little farther along the road. He sees, too, that the land in which he lives represents the best hope of freedom that the species has achieved so far. But he wonders why we should suppose that the progress stops here, and tries to imagine the greater freedom that may be nothing more than our natural destiny. It is a sweet dream. It may also be a pipe dream. Thoreau would not be delighted could he measure the freedom of an American today against his own. The Roman System is the most subtle of governments; it always looks benign.

24 Thoreau was surely thinking in terms familiar to us all. The present is better than the past. We know more. We are more decent and humane. We are moral. In our past,

there are savages, brutal and stupid: and tyranny and oppression beyond anything we can know. The caveman and his club. The alpha brute of the Primal Horde. The Old Man whose spear is not to be touched. The Emperors of the East. And so forth. By logic, then, we are required to suppose that our species had its beginning in the most absolute tyranny possible, supported by brute force.

25 Myths and legends like the story of Marduk are found everywhere. They all make the same point: Unless we are governed by power, we will behave badly. If we want "civilization," that condition which permits us to grow in decency and humaneness, we must make the bargain with Marduk. In other words, "the price we pay for freedom," which we ordinarily think of as a trifling inconvenience, something like Congress, perhaps, is in fact the surrender of freedom to force. And the story of Marduk reminds us that that's the way it has to be, unless we want to run the risk of "reverting" to that dreadful "state of nature," in which we will find ourselves dominated by a force that is far more visible than the force of the Roman System. The choice seems to be this: We can be dominated and comfortable in what we call civilization and call that "freedom," or we can be dominated and uncomfortable in the state of nature. And this is why we have always been taught that comfort is the greatest of life's blessings, and suffering the worst curse.

26 All the Marduk stories are told by Marduks. They all justify Marduk's ways to man. We are inclined to nod when we hear them, even if we nod sadly. But there is another class of old stories that we are inclined to dismiss as obvious wish fulfillments and fairy tales. They are the stories of the Golden Age which once was, and which step by step fell into silver, into brass, and finally into the mud and muck in which we now squirm. Marduks, who also run the schools, don't like such stories. Marduk after all, has no interest in restoring the universal peace and harmony which the unruly gods broke.

27 We have a faithful reader in Texas, a lady who was well known to us for her fruitcakes, but who will now be even better known for her acumen. After reading "Depending on Johnny," she sent us a copy of The Chalice and the Blade by Riane Eisler, published by Harper & Row. We think you ought to read it.

28 Ashley Montagu says that is "the most important book since Darwin's Origin of Species." Well, time will tell, but, in truth, we hope that he's right. Much good would come of such a success. The book is here and there a little shrill, and often a lot more "politically correct" than it has to be, but what it says in the main is worth serious consideration.

29 It arrived just a day or so after a letter in which another reader of "Depending on Johnny" had said that it had provided a useful idea about "the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy," and that worried us. We intended no such thing, but meant

rather to speak not of the replacement of one -archy by another, but of the first coming of -archy into human life and culture. But this reader's way of understanding suggests one of the problems that modern feminism will soon have to settle. There will be no better ways of living brought either to men or to women by the replacement of one system of rank and rule with another. What Riane Eisler wants to imagine is a social order not based at all on the principle of domination. She does not think this a pipe dream, and even suspects that there was just such a social order in existence before the coming of the god-kings and the priests who gave us, and celebrated in writing, the order that we now think of as "natural."

30 Numerous recent archeological discoveries in Crete and in Old Europe have given her the idea and some substantiation for it. She might also have looked, and perhaps will look yet, to the very mythology which the god-kings and priests invented for their own ends. Like others who came after them, notably the apologists of the Roman System who only reluctantly admitted the Virgin Mary into their systems and failed utterly in their attempts to keep her in her place, i.e., less than divine, the apologists of the god-king were unable to omit the universal peace and harmony of the Mother before there ever was a Marduk. And indeed, everywhere in the great body of lore called myth there are interesting shadows of the Mother cast on the self-assigned glory of the god-kings and their priests.

31 We hope to hear more from, and because of, Riane Eisler. We like feminism around here. But we think it is falling into dangerous inconsistencies. We would like to see feminists considering this sort of thing: When a mother gives her daughter to the schools, she sends her right into the heart of the Roman System. There she will take her proper, official place in a system of rank and rule. She will be in "a grade," and will move "upward." Her marks will be "high" or "low" or in the "middle." Her teacher will stand before her, as the sergeant stands before his platoon, and she will sit in her place in the ranks. Her teacher is also in the ranks, outranked by coordinators, who are outranked by vice-principals, who are outranked by . . . and so on and on, even unto Skyfather himself. There is no guarantee, of course, that the little child will learn such things as spelling and arithmetic, but one thing she will inevitably and permanently learn for certain: We live by rank and rule, and domination is necessary and righteous. And if that mother sends that child to day-care, her learning of that lesson will come all the sooner.

32 Nor is there any remedy for this in the token feminism now being preached in the schools. The Marduks long ago mastered the political arts of placation and cooption; they use them always to good effect in the device we call "education" just as they use them in the device we call "election." What teaching always takes place in the schools is

not in the content of the courses, but in the power of the metaphors of that life, the unmentioned reminders of "How It Is".

- 33 It seems to us that a true and complete feminism would seek not the adjustment of a government school system but its total destruction. Any human system is a Roman System; lacking the principle of domination, no system can be. On the other hand, if feminism is simply a movement designed to replace patriarchy with matriarchy and put women in the corner offices, which would probably be a teeny bit better than what we have, then its proper course would be the reform of the schools. We wonder which it is?
- 34 Is it merely sentimental claptrap to suppose that women are closer to that "simple art of loving" than men? Somehow, we do not think so. Nor does it seem right to suppose that the Roman System, or any other, can really have "lost" the art of loving as our fictional witness testifies. You cannot lose what you do not have; by constitution and definition, a system cannot love. It takes a person to do that.
- 35 It will help us not at all if some woman wields the sword of Aeneas. What we need to do is to go back and get his wife out of the burning city where he managed to leave her.

Source:

www.TheInvisibleSchool.org/04_publications/excerpts/Text.RomanSystem.pdf