

The Parable of Lighthaven

A short story by John Frederick Zurn

Many years ago, when the natural world wasn't ruled and distorted by the notion of time, there existed a small mountain kingdom called Lighthaven. This legendary world of cooperation and peace was unique in all the three worlds, both because of its location and its inhabitants. Established on a wind-swept plateau near the summit of the mysterious Felicity Mountains, its jagged cliffs and inaccessible trails made the possibility of interaction with other cultures nearly impossible. This blessed the Lighthaven people with the intuition to follow their own ancient ways without the threat of other cultures interfering. Left to themselves, the people of the Lighthaven plateau experienced the perpetual harmony and freedom that arises from contentment. Their lives were filled with a quiet innocence and joy.

The noble inhabitants of the Lighthaven Motherland knew nothing of the Underworld and the beings that existed far below their secluded mountain home. These individuals, who called themselves "Underworlders," acted very differently from the esoteric Lighthaven beings. They were cruel, petty, and brutally competitive. They spent their time developing schemes to defeat rivals and in preying on the weak. With no inner compass of conscience or compassion to guide them, they remained forever consumed by their desire for possessions and power. Because of their insatiable desires, they became easily frustrated and angered when their expectations felt thwarted. These erratic Underworlders were ruled entirely by their selfishness and passions. Their every effort seemed infected with self-interest and deceit.

However, these dangerous states of mind seemed inconceivable to the dwellers of Lighthaven. These pure beings had no concept of self-centeredness and aggression. With no sense of selfishness, the Lighthaven tribe flourished and expanded beyond the snares of the Underworlder's selfishness and competitiveness.

In fact, everything about the Lighthaven culture looked different from that of the Underworld. Unconcerned with satisfying their own selfish demands, everything seemed to flow to them anyway. Their magnificent plateau provided every basic need including pure water, abundant vegetation, and self-sustaining forests. In addition, the climate remained in harmony with the Lighthaven way of life, so the seasons were temperate, despite the plateau's high elevation. Because of this benevolent weather, shelters and other structures were primitive, yet functional and ascetically pleasing. Social relationship also grew naturally supportive without the tension that springs from jealousy and greed. The ideal of family and kinship appeared deeply respected, and it also nurtured natural bonds that required no institutions to legitimize their existence. In addition, since every inhabitant was educated, children wished to learn from everyone else, and no one individual felt honored as intellectually or physically superior.

Incredibly, even the finality of death itself occurred in a positive way. It was seen as ascension to a higher more subtle plane of existence where all could aspire to reach including animals and plants. Death wasn't viewed as a final defeat and humiliation, but rather as a new beginning through which every inhabitant could reunite with family and friends. The end of life meant affirming and celebrating a kind of rite of passage through which the spirit passed. When the spirit "kicked the frame" it discovered more vibrant worlds to explore.

Needless to say, criminal activity and the idea of justice remained unknown to the Lighthaven culture. Obviously, since no inhabitants even understood the meaning of the word "crime," no criminal acts actually occurred. Since no individuals engaged in selfish thoughts and actions, the notion of crime and punishment didn't exist either. Without even the notion of right and wrong, the kingdom was truly unique. Apprehending that love is the only reality, any other way of living appeared to be impossible for them.

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This utopian vision of love and grace endured for countless generations. Safely hidden from the rest of the three worlds, the Lighthaven race peacefully evolved with no interference from the poisonous minds of the Underworlders. Consequently, Lighthaven knew contentment, and since they existed forever isolated from the other worlds by the mysterious Felicity Mountains, they had no reason to venture out beyond their idyllic realm.

But this vision of eternity seemed destined to be forever altered by the most simple and innocent event imaginable. Late one evening, just before twilight, one young boy named Cloudwalker wandered off into the far western forest. After having followed the long meandering wooded path for some time, he finally stopped to rest on a soft bed of pine needles. As he listened to the nocturnal sounds of the captivating forest, Cloudwalker became drowsy, and for the first time in his young life, he fell asleep far from his family and the only home he had ever known.

When the boy awoke at dawn, he ultimately realized that he had become lost, and so he began searching for any promising trails that might lead him back to his family. However, in his confusion, Cloudwalker inadvertently followed an old animal trail that led him to an immense and mysterious cliff. Startled, but curious, Cloudwalker approached the edge of the precipice and peered down over the edge. At that very moment, a sudden gust of wind caught hold of him, and the boy plummeted into the clouds and through the ominous sky below.

Miraculously, Cloudwalker somehow survived his nearly fatal plunge off Mount Felicity. However, by the time he had tumbled all the way to the bottom of the mountain, he appeared to be barely conscious, and initially, he questioned whether he felt alive or dead. Then, after a time, he realized that he was very much alive but also very lost. Back on the plateau, it wasn't long before Cloudwalker's family realized their son had gone missing. At first, they were unconcerned because the boy had often wandered into the forests to enjoy its tranquil beauty. Nevertheless, they soon became troubled when they realized they couldn't find him anywhere. Even with the help of their friends, Cloudwalker's family still couldn't find him. Despite all their efforts, nobody could either physically see him or mentally sense his presence. Even if the boy had transitioned, the Lighthaven community would have at least been able to apprehend his spirit passing into the cosmic realm. So, when the tribe failed to connect with Cloudwalker on any level, they were truly bewildered. It felt as if Cloudwalker had simply vanished.

Meanwhile, down in the Underworld, Cloudwalker gradually became aware of his surroundings. He recognized that he was alone in a dark and forbidding forest. In addition, the air felt so smothering that it was difficult to take full deep breaths. All around him, the boy could hear strange shrieks and dreadful howls that challenged his courage. He could also feel an unfamiliar sense of uneasiness enter his heart. This new sensation so surprised and worried him that in his haste to find his way back to Lighthaven, he turned in the wrong direction and actually hiked away from the Mount Felicity foothills, withdrawing even deeper into the dense forest of the Underworld.

Not surprisingly, Cloudwalker's noisy presence attracted the notice of several Underworld soldiers who happened to be patrolling in the woods around him. The soldiers were enormous, hulking beings with muscular limbs and disproportionately small heads. "Who are you?" the leader demanded. "And why do you trespass in his majesty's realm?"

Cloudwalker, who felt obviously confused and knew little about his predicament, couldn't give any kind of clever response, so he simply told the truth. "I fell from the sky above the clouds where my people live. I didn't realize I wasn't welcome here."

Without hesitation, the Underworld leader seemed to believe Cloudwalker's assertion and suddenly altered his approach. "My name is Strongfist, and it's my duty to make certain that King Darkington's forests remain protected from rebels and thieves. Now, what's your name?"

"My name is Cloudwalker," the Lighthaven inhabitant responded. "To be honest, I didn't realize that your world even existed. I had no idea life existed below the clouds until I stumbled

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over the mountain.”

Strongfist seemed amused that Cloudwalker’s name so poorly suited him, but he appeared puzzled by the boy’s enigmatic remarks. He felt certain the young intruder had expressed the truth. He also wanted to learn more about the boy’s kingdom above the clouds that appeared to be so remote it was unknown to everybody in the Underworld.

After a few moments of silence, Strongfist decided to take his captive back to his camp, so he could learn more about the boy and his provocative statements. As the soldiers escorted Cloudwalker even deeper into the forest, he could feel his physical strength returning, but he remained conflicted about Strongfist’s intentions. Words like “trespass,” “rebel,” and “thief” sounded unfamiliar to him, but they seemed important to the Underworld leader. There was also a strange sense of power in the leader’s voice and manner that Cloudwalker couldn’t have recognized as pride.

As the young hostage struggled to keep pace with his captors, he began to sense that he could not only be lost, but also he could be in some kind of peril. These new feelings of doubt and apprehension that began bubbling up in his mind made Cloudwalker uneasy about his surroundings and the soldiers who continued to lead him deeper into the unknown. Finally, however, Cloudwalker’s equanimity returned, and he spoke out, “Strongfist, can you help me find my way back home? My family and friends must be missing me.”

Strongfist, who now felt convinced the boy had some value, responded almost compassionately. “Yes, I will help you,” he replied soothingly. “But first, you must show me exactly where you fell off the mountain and into the forest foothills. Then we can help you climb back up to your cloud protected mesa. We’ll begin by hiking back to where I found you - tomorrow at dawn.”

Cloudwalker couldn’t comprehend Strongfist’s reference “tomorrow at dawn” because in the Lighthaven world time existed almost always in the present with no real concept of “yesterday” or “tomorrow.” Nevertheless, the boy naively trusted Strongfist because, for Cloudwalker, faith in others didn’t need to be earned, it was simply given. With no subterfuge or conceit to challenge it, trust was a natural part of his harmonious Lighthaven tradition.

While Cloudwalker faced the Underworld alone, back in the Kingdom of Lighthaven, the disappearance of the boy became ever more troubling. King Goodus gathered his people together and requested that they all search for their missing tribe member, and then report back to him. With an unfamiliar sense of trepidation, the entire realm scattered out across the plateau seeking any sign of Cloudwalker that might reveal where he was, or what might have happened to him.

Yet, later on, as the shadows of twilight slowly extended across the Lighthaven plateau, another catastrophic event took place, that would both provide an explanation for Cloudwalker’s disappearance and lead the entire realm into an uncharacteristic feeling of panic.

Deep in the forest, two girls named Rainstay and Earthholder, had discovered Cloudwalker’s canteen while helping to search for him along the wooded trails. Shortly thereafter, they found his footprints which led consistently westward. Then, tragically, Earthholder became so excited about finding the canteen, that she began racing through the woods without observing the landscape beneath her. When she unknowingly reached the cliff, she stumbled over an exposed rock. By the time Rainstay finally caught up to her, Rainstay had arrived just in time to see her friend, Earthholder, plunge off the mountain and down through the clouds.

Immediately, of course, Rainstay understood exactly what had happened to Cloudwalker. Before long, as her racing thoughts and anxious heart created a kind of unknown feeling of dread, she sought out the protection of her tribe. She sprinted back to the king, so she could report the terrible news.

Despite her veracity, at first the King didn’t believe Rainstay. How could anyone be foolish enough to approach the farthest frontier of Lighthaven where thick undergrowth and

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unpredictable fog could confuse even the most expert trekker? Before long, however, the king's compassion sought out a solution. "We must rescue both Cloudwalker and Earthholder who have fallen off Mount Felicity. We need a plan that will allow us to descend the cliffs, so we can find our children and bring them home."

"But how?" Cloudwalker's mother nervously yelled out. "It's impossible to climb down the mountain if it is as steep as Rainstay has described!"

"Yes," King Goodus agreed. "But we must find a way all the same."

Then suddenly, a young builder from the crowd shouted, "I know how to rescue them!"

The stunned King turned to see the face in the crowd and recognized her as the one called Wordmaker. "So, what's your idea?" King Goodus shouted back.

Wordmaker approached the king determinedly, as the crowd created a path for her. Then she stopped directly in front of him and asserted, "We can intertwine some giant ferns and attach them to some willow branches. Then we can glide off the mountain and down through the clouds. These gliders will slow our descent and help us reach the ground. A number of us could glide down the mountain together, and then after we've rescued our companions, we can figure out a way to climb back home to the plateau."

King Goodus, although respectful of Wordmaker's initiative, wasn't eager to put the builder's imaginative scheme into action. There appeared to be many aspects of the plan that seemed to depend on either expert skill, good luck, or both. So instead of adopting Wordmaker's idea, the king advised the community to carefully consider her unusual proposal. Because he felt unwilling to risk the lives of any more members of his tribe, he spoke in a direct and candid manner. "The disappearance of Cloudwalker and Earthholder has become a very serious crisis," he began somberly. "But we must make certain we don't sacrifice anyone else in our longing to rescue our friends. We must consider Wordmaker's plan carefully. We will meet again soon to see if we can build a glider that will fly."

Having spoken quietly, but firmly, the king returned to his lodge believing his cautionary words and serious tone had been clearly understood. He fully expected his faithful subjects would heed his advice and wait until they were all of one mind before they took action.

But King Goodus was mistaken. Instead of patiently waiting for the rising dawn to discuss Wordmaker's ideas in more detail, the inhabitants crafted dozens of giant fern gliders during the night using the moon as a lamp to direct them. Then they scouted out possible mountains bluffs that might be less treacherous, so if the gliders failed, they would still have a chance to crash land against a mountain ledge. After a comprehensive search, they finally discovered and explored a suitable site for their gliders to take off from the plateau. Then they returned to collect their crafts, which were some miles away, anxious to see if they would really take to the air.

Astonishingly, when dawn appeared on the plateau the next day, the entire tribe had forsaken their utopian paradise in order to search for Cloudwalker and Earthholder. In their quest, they had all successfully managed to vault over the mountain the night before with their surprisingly sturdy gliders. These primitive flying birds performed their part - both slowing their descent and guiding them through the clouds. When King Goodus discovered the truth, however, he realized that he now became the only living soul in his Lighthaven world, and his mind grew deeply troubled.

At first, the king assumed the inhabitants of his realm had retreated to an isolated area of his kingdom, perhaps discussing Wordmaker's plan more specifically. Yet, when he discovered the glider site and the multiple footprints that led right off the cliffs, he became less optimistic. This feeling of worry he had recently sensed created thoughts of dread for his missing tribe members. As King Goodus considered the dangerous circumstances more carefully, he realized that he had only two choices. Either he could search for his tribe, or he could patiently wait for their return. Even though the king felt sure he could eventually find his friends if he chose to descend the mountain, he was also concerned that if the Lighthaven

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Kingdom were abandoned entirely, something terrible could happen. Perhaps, they would all be forever lost or become marooned in the Underworld void below the territorial boundaries of Mount Felicity.

Even as King Goodus considered his difficult and potentially deadly paths of action, the inhabitants of his realm had already descended to the base of Mount Felicity. Soon, the first teams of gliders had landed safely, and then the others followed, until they had all begun to spread out across the narrow foothill trails. Before long, they had reassembled in a solitary open meadow.

But when they finally counted their ranks, to make certain that everyone had landed safely, Rainstay made a startling discovery. She happened to gaze up at the trees and glimpsed at two fellow rescuers entangled in the upper branches of a gigantic oak tree. Although both appeared to be alive, one seemed to be in agonizing pain.

Rainstay immediately informed the others, and several courageous team members climbed up the ancient tree and brought both victims down to the ground. One of them named, Windsaver, was quick to respond to treatment, but the other called Moonshadow, couldn't be revived. In a grotesque and anguished spectacle of panic and despair, the tortured rescuer died of his wounds.

Of course, the other rescuers who had witnessed the tragedy didn't know death could be such a gruesome and violent event. On the mesa, death existed as an almost festive occasion, a kind of secret initiation that often felt both beautiful and mysterious. It was never painful and frightening. In fact in their doubt and despair, the group couldn't be sure whether Moonshadow had actually died or was simply unconscious. They could neither sense his presence nor could they understand his suffering.

In complete solidarity, the Lighthaven rescuers had all courageously descended Mount Felicity in order to liberate Cloudwalker and Earthholder. But now one of their group members had perished, and this realization really took hold. It left them feeling gloomy and silent, as they each considered the now more complicated situation. Everyone stood silently by the old oak as their anxiety threatened to overpower them, and these new powerful feelings were almost more than they could bear. As the group huddled together and began to formulate a plan, King Goodus's earlier wise counsel became even more pertinent as the group faced this new and very unsettling crisis.

Yet, the awful incident at the ancient oak tree hadn't been entirely tragic. Windsaver, who had been snagged by the huge oak tree branches, had been able to observe his surroundings before he passed out. As he looked out over the forest, he could perceive a large citadel that had been lit up throughout the night. When his condition improved, he turned to Sunseeker, who seemed to be evolving as the group's natural leader, and tried to speak, but couldn't. Finally, Sunseeker gave him some strong tea and asked, "What do you want, Windsaver? What are you trying to tell us?"

The young tribal member took a deep breath and replied softly, "Far out to the west I saw a magnificent city that turned night into day. Maybe our friends have been able to travel there."

Sunseeker listened carefully to Windsaver, as he described the miraculous city that appeared to be more visible than the moon at night. Nevertheless, Sunseeker also remained cautious. He knew that the group was now relying on his judgment, and he wasn't about to act rashly. Yet, Windsaver's account of the city of lights couldn't be ignored either. This alien world they now sojourned through wasn't going to simply reveal its secrets easily. This seemed especially true in regard to the location and condition of their friends, Cloudwalker and Earthholder. In the end, Sunseeker decided in favor of the group venturing in the direction of the mysterious city of light.

As the events slowly unfolded on the Underworld, King Goodus grew ever more impatient and apprehensive, as he kept his solitary vigil at Lighthaven. He had witnessed his friends

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disappear; first one at a time, and then in a massive group. Worse still, everyone who attempted to rescue those who had gone missing were now lost as well. The anxious king had been monitoring the mountain trails and jagged cliffs hoping to see his people returning. But, with no visible sign that any one of his subjects had returned, King Goodus felt sure that the realm was on the verge of collapse. If his companions were in danger, he must find them.

King Goodus waited uneasily until the shadow of the moon had inspired his compassionate heart, and then he could wait no longer. The great king abandoned his sanctuary and glided off Mount Felicity leaving his Motherland uninhabited and unguarded.

By the time King Goodus had safely landed in the newly discovered Underworld, he had become very cognizant of several important facts. First, he fully understood he existed in an alien world, and he was already an interloper. Second, all his subjects were remained trapped in this world either alone or all together. Lastly and probably worst of all, perhaps the king and his companions couldn't ultimately find their way back to Lighthaven at all, or perhaps some Underworld group might take control of their home and cast them out even if they did return.

All these possibilities deeply troubled King Goodus, so he began exploring the surrounding area around him without delay. He soon found a number of discarded gliders strewn in various places near the trail, and then arrived at the colossal oak tree where he also found the corpse of Moonshadow. Horrified, he quickly circled the tree seeking clues about Moonshadow's fate and the location of the rest of the group. As he searched behind the massive tree, he noticed hundreds of footprints leading west. Without any further proof of his subjects' whereabouts, the king respectfully but hurriedly buried his friend Moonshadow and then began following the clearly marked trail.

In the meantime, as King Goodus advanced along the path, his friends had already approached the brightly lit city in the west. With no real understanding of the imminent danger they would soon be facing, they all ran ahead eagerly. Before long, they were challenged by a small patrol of Underworlders. "Who are you and what are you doing here?" the leader angrily yelled out.

"We are searching for our friends, Cloudwalker and Earthholder," Sunseeker replied earnestly.

Instantly the leader altered his tone and attitude. "Are you talking about the individual who fell out of the sky from the kingdom above the clouds?"

"Yes," Sunseeker answered, feeling reassured. "They live with us in Lighthaven on Mount Felicity. Do you know them?"

"Oh, yes, certainly," one of the Underworlders replied enthusiastically. "We know both of your friends," the leader concurred. "We'll take you to them. Just follow us."

The excited Lighthaven group quickly followed the unknown beings naively walking into an ambush. In their trusting innocence, they believed they stood on the verge of accomplishing their mission. Of course, they had not.

It was only when the Lighthaven rescuers had been herded into a huge artificially lit corral that they realized they had been betrayed. Now they saw that the uniformed Underworlders weren't the guides they claimed to be. After a few hours of fear and uncertainty, their leader finally reentered the huge makeshift prison through the locked gate and began speaking in a suspiciously casual tone. "Would you like to see your friends, Cloudwalker and Earthholder?" He asked slyly.

The captives felt surprised but comforted to hear their friends' names again, but they also felt less trusting as well. "Where are they?" Sunseeker demanded with more of a sense of authority.

The leader of the kidnappers finally identified himself. He replied, "My name is Strongfist, and I can take you to your friends. But first, I wish to learn more about this realm above the clouds that your companions keep describing to me. I've decided to set you free if you are willing to lead me there."

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Sunseeker, who remained very concerned about his missing friends, quickly agreed to Strongfist's subtle threat. "I will take you there myself," he answered enthusiastically.

Unfortunately, the Lighthaven leader still possessed little experience with deception and wickedness, so he couldn't apprehend that Strongfist might be an evil being who wished to invade Lighthaven and take control. Sunseeker's companions seemed also inclined to trust Strongfist and his followers despite their recent experiences since their innocence was still mostly intact. Because of this seemingly incorruptible simplicity, it wasn't long before the Lighthaven group began leading Strongfist and his henchmen to the exact location where they had glided down out of the sky.

When they finally arrived, however, Strongfist looked disappointed. "Are you telling me that you descended from the cliffs of this unscalable mountain?"

"Yes," Sunseeker answered somewhat proudly. "We managed to leap off our Lighthaven plateau and land here, but we don't know how to climb back up again."

Now, Strongfist became clearly frustrated and ordered Cloudwalker and Earthholder to be brought up from the rear of the newly formed line where they had been concealed from their companions. When they appeared, several of Strongfist's thugs threw them both to the ground. One particularly arrogant soldier sneered at them and bellowed, "You're really walking on clouds now, boy! Looks like you're 'cloudfalling!'"

The others quickly joined in the harassment and another soldier turned to Earthholder and yelled, "Well at least this girl here is holding the earth, or is she really just smashed against it?"

Strongfist demanded his followers cease their intimidation, but only after he appeared to be getting bored. He then once again demanded to know how they intended to ascend to the top of the imposing Felicity Mountains. He finally delivered Cloudwalker and Earthholder directly to their comrades and spoke assertively. "Here are your comrades. Now, how do we reach Lighthaven?"

At that precise moment of hopelessness and strife King Goodus finally discovered the location of his companions. Apprehending their predicament, he courageously introduced himself and then stepped into the midst of the group and took charge of the crisis. The king asserted, "We will gladly guide you and your followers to our home. In fact, I will consider all of you to be my invited guests. Now stop bullying my Lighthaven companions and sit down. Then I'll be happy to explain my plan to climb the mountain."

The Underworld leader looked stunned to see this unknown king seemingly appear out of nowhere. Soon, however, he became more intent on hearing the stranger's ideas. Strongfist's fascination with Lighthaven that had been fostered by Cloudwalker and Earthholder was now an obsession that he couldn't ignore. Now, in the foothills of the mighty Mount Felicity, Strongfist became more determined than ever to find the Lighthaven Motherland.

"All right," he asserted boldly, "Let's hear about your plan, King Goodus, if that's your real name."

After reintroducing himself to reassure Strongfist and his followers, King Goodus continued. "In order to reach Lighthaven, we must build a gigantic ladder by sculpting rungs across the face of the mountain."

"That's impossible!" The unimaginative Strongfist complained angrily.

"Yes, it is possible!" the king responded confidently. "But it may take a long time."

"There must be an easier way to scale up above the clouds," Strongfist persisted.

"There is no faster or simpler way," the king replied sternly.

While Strongfist continued questioning the king, Sunseeker and the other Lighthaven inhabitants already aware of the king's resolve. Before long, Sunseeker made his own suggestion, "We need only carve simple hand and foot holds out of the rock. It clearly isn't possible to construct some kind of magnificently designed ladder; we need only small servable breaks in the rocks at various intervals." Then turning to Strongfist, Sunseeker continued.

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“Surely you Underworlders have chisels and hammers that we can utilize to break off the rock?”

Finally, even Strongfist relented, ceased his opposition, and endorsed the extraordinary construction project which would begin on that very day. Both the Underworlders and the Lighthaven tribe now worked together with no bullying or fear.

At first, the progress in building the structure seemed disappointingly slow and uncoordinated, creating a sense of despondency among the workers. But eventually, in order to accelerate their progress, and to keep everyone working simultaneously, a number of expert climbers positioned themselves high above the others. Then, after the expert climbers had sculpted a ladder to their positions, the next group of less experienced climbers improved on the preliminary rungs above them. As the construction grew more complex, the expert climbers became more daring and required the other climbers to keep up with them. To insure that falling rock didn't crash down on the workers below, the experts pursued a diagonal course that helped minimize the risk of accidents. Sadly, despite all these precautions, a number of inexperienced climbers did get killed when they were struck by flying rock that caused them to cascade over the side of Mountain

As can be imagined, the precarious ladder slowly rose up on the face of the mountain and required great skill and infinite patience to maintain and extend it. But despite all their efforts, the progress continued to be painstakingly difficult and fatigue became unavoidable and unforgiving. Every day brought the climbers only slightly higher up the mountain and occasionally anger and fear created additional problems.

However, at long last, reaching the Lighthaven plateau appeared to be nearly accomplished, and when the news came down the mountain from the advanced group of climbers, Strongfist became intoxicated with hope. From his position at the base of the mountain, he ordered everyone already above him to move aside, so he could reach the plateau as quickly as possible. By climbing over and around the other workers, he soon created a dangerous “log jam” endangering everyone on the face of Mount Felicity. All the other workers needed to climb erratically or move aside in order to escape Strongfist's impatience.

Incredibly, when Strongfist finally stepped onto the plateau, he looked dangerously disappointed. His expectations about Lighthaven, based on all the extraordinary descriptions of its riches and splendor, were soon interpreted by him to be cunning fabrications. Strongfist's understanding of Lighthaven, relied on his own Underworld perceptions that sought out a realm that promised affluence and vulnerability. When Cloudwalker had described the Lighthaven world as a utopia with golden streets and silver forests, Strongfist believed these images represented actual realities brimming with gold and silver. When Earthholder characterized the plateau as having a river of joy and an endless abundance of freedom, Strongfist expected to find a tangible place where he could physically live forever doing whatever he wished. It became painfully evident that he had misinterpreted the ultimate freedom that had been described by King Goodus. Lighthaven wasn't a place where he could steal whatever he desired and subjugate any group he chose. In addition, he also ultimately realized he wouldn't be able to manipulate any events for his own purposes, as he so frequently had done in the Underworld.

Instead, what Strongfist actually observed appeared to be an immense and dreary mesa that seemed unworthy of colonization or even exploration. Understandably, soon his frustration descended into wrath. He accosted King Goodus and shouted bitterly, “All of you told me Lighthaven existed as a world of joy and freedom! But instead, it's just a cold, dreary wasteland without silver or gold!”

As Strongfist continued his tantrum, King Goodus finally grew tired of the brutish leader's self-centered attitude and aggressive behavior. The good king cornered Strongfist and responded to him with righteous indignation. “Strongfist, your understanding of Lighthaven has always been based on your selfish desires. In your pride and greed, you have assumed our Utopia is a world of rivalry and avarice. However, Lighthaven really is a land of compassion and

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peace. Your constant hankerings after the things of the Underworld have made you blind to the love and beauty of our Utopian Motherland. Perhaps someday you will return and perceive our world for what it truly is, instead of what you want it to be.”

Surprisingly, Strongfist didn't respond angrily to the king's indictment of his character. Instead, he simply turned aside and commanded his followers to descend with him back down the mountain. Whether Strongfist's decision rested on a certain wariness he had for the king, or because there didn't seem to be anything in Lighthaven he truly wanted, he seemed as eager to leave, as he had been to arrive.

When they finally left, Cloudwalker and the others were anxious for the king to explain his angry words to Strongfist. More importantly, they also wanted to know if the Underworld would again invade their ancient home. “Should we destroy the mountain ladder?” Cloudwalker wanted to know. “Won't the Underworlders find their way back up here again someday?”

King Goodus well understood that his companions were confused and a little frightened, so he took a few moments to explain the situation more fully. “We must not destroy the ladder,” the king began solemnly. “Although the Underworld is ruled by ambition and greed, it is also true that these negative qualities lead to disappointment and suffering. In a future time, some Underworld beings will understand the truth about their selfish world. When they begin to understand that desires create mistrust and fear, they will remember to return here. Either by being denied wealth and success in the world, or by becoming disillusioned by the Underworld's empty promises, they will someday change, perhaps one by one at first, then in groups.”

Earthholder was next to question King Goodus about the series of strange incidents that had recently so dominated their lives. “How will Strongfist and his people ever be willing to change so drastically? Will they ever be willing to leave their Underworld? Aren't they so selfish and deceitful that they will never desire to live in peace on our plateau?”

“Yes,” King Goodus softly replied. “On their own, the Underworlders would most probably never find their way. So, we must help them. Some of us must return to the Underworld and teach the inhabitants about a different way to live.”

Anticipating the negative reaction of his companions, the good king continued. “First, I will descend to the Underworld alone. When I return, I will explain to you how to persuade them to abandon their brutality and selfishness.”

By the time the king had finished speaking, the entire Lighthaven tribe were persuaded to endorse the king's vision. When the king finally departed and had begun his descent down Mount Felicity, they all felt awestruck by his unconditional love and courage. They now clearly understood that King Goodus was reentering a realm that probably couldn't or wouldn't understand their way of life.

When King Goodus finally reached the Felicity foothills, he immediately headed for the Underworld citadel near Darkington where his companions had been interned. Using the city's manufactured lights to guide him, the king soon arrived at the outskirts of the broken city and keenly observed the many dilapidated structures surrounding him. Feeling drawn to one specific shack, the king quickly entered and found two young children cowering in a corner. When the king attempted to comfort them, an Underworld guardian appeared, drew out his clubstick and began pummeling King Goodus until he was slumped over on the floor. The two children looked too stunned to move and their faces were almost expressionless. The guardian, however, looked jubilant as he addressed the wounded king. “Good King Goodus,” the guardian bellowed. “We know all about you here in Darkington. We don't want you or your cloud hugging relatives around here. Now leave and don't come back and take those two sniffling brats with you!”

The king waited for the vicious guardian to leave out the back door, and then he quickly spoke to the boy and girl who still appeared terrified. “Do you want to come with me to a place that is safe, where everyone is kind?”

The two children looked badly frightened, but they finally nodded “yes.” The king smiled

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back briefly, but realizing that the guardian could return at any moment, he quickly led the children away from Darkington. Within hours, the king's patience and compassion persevered, and they all approached the foothills of Mount Felicity. However, when they reached the intimidating cliffs, the children became very frightened again, this time because they felt very reluctant to even attempt to climb up the immense mountain. Initially, they refused to try at all.

Then the unexpected happened. As King Goodus unsuccessfully tried to coax the children to begin the ascent, Cloudwalker and Earthholder appeared from behind a boulder just above the base of the mountain. Within minutes, they both jumped to the ground and attempted to help the bewildered children. After gaining their trust, they hoisted the weary youngsters on their shoulders and quietly began their ascent up the mountain.

Inexplicably, after Earthholder and Cloudwalker had climbed a short distance with the children, Earthholder looked down and saw that King Goodus wasn't following them. She called down to him with a feeling of apprehension and said, "King Goodus, aren't you coming home with us?"

"No," the king shouted back energetically.

"Why not?" Cloudwalker added, also calling down nervously. "Why are you returning to the Underworld?"

"Because some will listen," he replied bravely.

Then, having safely delivered the two children to his finest companions, King Goodus returned to the Underworld in search of future students.

About the Author...



John Frederic Zurn earned an M.A. in English from Western Illinois University and spent much of his career as a school teacher. John has also worked at several developmental training centers, teaching employment readiness skills to mentally challenged teenagers and adults. Now retired, he continues writing and publishing poems and stories. As one of seven children, his experiences growing up continue to help inspire his art and influence his life.