

## House of Games

I stood on the steps of very large, very old building. In fact, it was the largest building I had ever seen. It looked like the front of a huge museum. Not so tall, only a few stories, but so wide I could not see the corners of the front. There were wide steps leading up to the massive doors. I noticed the building was made of wood. It seemed unusual for a building so large. There were tall columns in front on the porch which were carved and decorated, but still made of wood.

I approached the doors which were three feet taller than my head and using the brass ring knocked on the door. It swung inward and I entered. Immediately, I noticed two men standing inside the door.

"What is this place?" I asked them.

"It is called the House of Games." said one man.

"But some call it the House of Life." replied the other one. They stood side by side dressed alike and I took them for identical twins.

"And who are you?" was my next question.

"I am your guide." they both responded in unison.

"But you can't both be my guide. I only need one." I said.

"Then choose me for I will always guide you truthfully." said one.

"Why not have two guides," said the other. "It will give you a choice. You will get two points of view, and you can choose the one that appeals to you the most."

"Okay," I replied, not knowing what else to do. "You can both show me around until I figure things out and know where to go and what to do."

Then I turned my attention towards the inside of the building. I was facing a large open atrium. There were sky lights near the top and the atrium was at least five stories high with balconies around it on each floor. It was so long I could not see to its end. I turned to my guides, "Lead on," I said

They bowed ever so slightly and motioning me to go ahead as we walked into the atrium. I could see hallways leading off on both sides.

"What are these?" I questioned.

"These are the halls in which the games are played." they both responded

"What do you mean by games?" I asked.

"Everyone must play some sort of game if he is alive. Some people play many games at the same time. Others play one game for a while until they get bored and then go on to another. Still others devote their whole life to one game." they explained.

I was still not sure what they meant so I asked, "May I see?"

"You may go into any of the halls you choose. Here is a bag of tokens. You may play until the tokens are all gone." They handed me a small pouch. But you cannot open it. Only the director of the game can do that."

"But then how many are in the bag and how will I know when they are all gone?" I questioned.

When the tokens are gone you will be told, but not before and then you will have to leave the house."

It was at this point that their words divided. One said, "It doesn't matter how many tokens you have. Just have as much fun as you can while they last."

The other said, "The number of tokens is limited, so choose wisely the games you will play and make sure they are worth your token."

So, we started walking towards the first hall on the right. The sign over it said, "Hall of Material Wealth".

"Let's go in here." I suggested. The two guides followed after me as we walked down the dim corridor. I saw open doors with voices, laughter, and exclamations of excitement coming from them. I went to peek in. Inside of the first door was a room so large it appeared to be outdoors. There was a stream flowing and men bending down swishing gravel in a pan and then dumping it. Some looked sad and

weary. I asked my guides why they looked so sad if they were having fun.

One replied, "Oh, they are having fun. They just don't look it."

Suddenly, one man jumped up and shrieked, "I've found it! I'm rich. Look at this!"

The others stopped their work to gawk and then set back to work with renewed vigor. The lucky man put his nugget in his pocket and continued to bend over the stream.

The other guide stated, "It's the chance that they will find gold and the thrill of that moment that keeps them playing, even though they are really not happy."

That game didn't appeal to me so I asked if we could find another room. The next room was full of people yelling and it took me awhile to figure out that this was the stock market where fortunes were made and lost. I didn't like that one either.

So we continued. In one room was a business board meeting. My guides informed me there were businesses for everything and I could try at any of them to get rich. There were also various occupations. One room had a courtroom where lawyers made money. One was a medical clinic and hospital where doctors saw patient after patient. There even a room for the gambler with gambling of every kind: on dogs and horses, cards, machines and others.

I watched all these people to see if I wanted to play any of these games. They all seemed so attractive and exciting. One of my guides encouraged me to play, "Come on, just try one. You'll see how fun it is."

But I hesitated and continued to observe. I saw smiles and excitement when people received money whether they were paid for their work or won a prize. But the smile faded quickly and as I watched them play. It seemed they were working awfully hard at playing.

Finally, I turned to my guides, "I don't think wealth is for me. What else is there?"

They said, "Well let's just go and see."

The next hall we passed said "Hall of Shopping". One guide said, "Often people spend time at the games in the first hall and then come here to spend the money on things they desire."

I walked part way down this hall and stuck my head in a few doors. There was a shopping mall in one. Others had open air markets, catalogs and computers to mail order, and even resale shops. Again, I saw happy faces as they picked out their items and purchased them. But once outside the store, the smiles vanished. I was not impressed.

"Let's move on." I said.

We came to another hall. "This definitely is one of our most popular." said a guide. "I saw the sign at the top, "Hall of Sports and Recreation"

"Actually, this one is so large it has two division." he continued. "One side is for spectators and one for participants. So, one can play this game by just watching."

We wandered down past room after room again. There were all kinds of sports in progress, football games, baseball games, hockey, golf, to name a few. Even the Olympics were being played. I could choose any of these to enjoy either as spectator or a participant.

"Yes this would be fun," I thought. I could hear the cheering crowds. "It would be wonderful to be admired like that."

So I entered the room where the horse show was in progress. Oh how I would like to ride a horse and become a famous equestrian. I handed my bag to the director of the game and he removed one token and took me to a room. There was my riding outfit. As I emerged from the room with my new clothes, I saw the horse. He was big and beautiful, a liver chestnut with flaxen mane and tail and a white blaze on his face. What a sensation we would make in the ring!

But then the director burst my bubble. "You will have to practice many hours before you can be in the show."

So I took my new horse and went to the practice arena. We were there for a while and then the director came over to us and said, "If you wish to continue it will be one more token please"

I agreed because I figured since I had just started playing. I must still have a lot of tokens left. We practiced some more and I then I started to talk to the other riders there.

“How many tokens have you spent here?” I asked. I was amazed at their answers..

“I responded,”So many tokens and yet you are still not ready for the show?”

“Only the best make it to the show arena and one has to be willing to spend all his tokens to reach it.”

I liked horses and riding but “all my tokens?” I wasn't ready for that kind of commitment. I remembered the words of one of the guides, “Your tokens are limited so make sure you use them wisely.”

I walked around and met a few who had been in the show arena and won and asked if it was worth it. “Oh yes.” they said. “I wouldn't trade that moment of glory and excitement for anything.”

My two guides were back at my side. “You see it is worth it.” said one. “Go ahead and use all your tokens here.”

The other responded, “Remember they said, 'that moment'. Will you give all your tokens for one moment?”

He was right. I couldn't do that, so I gave my horse and clothes back to the director and left the room.

As we walked I asked, “Are all the rooms like that?”

“Like what?” they asked.

“There are lots of people playing the same game and only a few can win and to do so you have to spend all your tokens and even then you may not win. If you do, it's only for a moment,” I replied.

“Yes, they are all like that.” one guide replied. “It's true only a few actually attain what they are pursuing, but the fun is in the excitement of the pursuit and the anticipation of winning. And when one does win, if there are tokens left,he can always play a different game. Many do you know.”

We walked for awhile more past other hallways: the Hall of Fame, the Hall of Physical Health and Beauty, the Hall of Arts and Crafts, the Hall of Music, of Culinary Arts, of Gourmet Eating, of Substance Use, of Gardening. Ah, gardening! I would like to try that one.

We walked down the hall and into the first room. A vast expanse of land was before us. I gave the director my pouch and he led me to an already tilled plot of ground. He gave me a catalog to pick out the seeds I wanted . “This will be fun.” I thought to myself. I picked out the seeds and when they were brought to me carefully dropped them into the furrows I had made. I watched as the seeds sprouted and seedlings emerged. Soon they bloomed and tomatoes grew and ripened on the plants. I ate one. It was so good, sweet and juicy.

I was enjoying it, but then a person came over from another garden plot and said, “Your tomatoes are okay, but you should see mine.”

I walked over to his plot and they were bigger, sweeter, and juicier. “Why don't you join our garden club?” he said. “We share tips on how to grow the best gardens. We have our garden show once a year to see who can grow the best garden.”

I had enjoyed the tomato, but now here was that word again, “the best”. About that time the director came over and asked for another token. I wasn't sure I wanted to continue to play. So I asked the other gardener standing there,”How many tokens does it take to become a really good gardener?”

He replied, To grow the best, probably all you have.”

I enjoyed tomatoes, but not that much, so I asked my guides, “If I leave can I come back to this room?”

One said, “Of course you may come and grow tomatoes whenever you want as long as you still have tokens because it will cost a token each time you enter and more the longer you stay.”

The other said, “You'd better stay. If you leave you may never come back and then you'll never taste a vine ripened tomato again.”

I thought for a moment. I do like tomatoes and other fresh vegetables and fruits. I also like working with the soil and actually getting my hands in it. But I didn't think tomatoes were worth all my tokens.

So we left the room. We wandered down many halls and I entered many rooms often spending a token or two. But none seemed worthy of more than that. And, I didn't know how many tokens I had left. That bothered me.

I observed a lot of people in the rooms. Some seemed happy, but that was when they won or achieved their goal. But their faces, while they were working hard at playing, told another story. I saw no fun or

joy. I remembered the words of a preacher I heard once, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."

Finally I turned to my guides again, "Sirs, there must be at least one game worth playing, worth spending my tokens on. Something that will last beyond the moment."

One guide spoke up, "Well, there is the Hall of Religion. We haven't gotten to that one yet."

We soon arrived at that hall. With renewed interest and excitement, I entered. As in the other halls there were many doors to many rooms. One said Buddhism, one Hinduism, another Islam, and on down the hallway were doors for many other religions. There was even a door for "Create Your Own Religion." I found the door for Christianity only to find it led to other doors: Catholic, Baptist, Charismatic, Presbyterian, and more. I went into the Baptist door. I paid my token and was immediately involved in a church.

I attended services. I paid my tithes. I visited shut-ins. I read my Bible. I said my prayers. I looked at the people around me. They were all smiles on Sunday, but when I saw they way they looked and acted during the week I never would have known they were part of a church. I started to wonder if this game was worth it. So many rituals, rules, and programs to attend. Playing the church game was hard work. I was tiring of this game as well, so when the director came and asked for another token, I said, "No thank you." and left.

By now I had really given up, but I asked my guides one more time, "Isn't there another game different from all of these?"

One guide said, "No."

But before he could continue the other guide interrupted and said, "There is one other. Follow me."

The other guide yelled out, "No, no. Don't follow him. He will lead you to ruin, to the loss of all your tokens with nothing to show for it. The other rooms all gave you something: trophies, wealth, medals, prizes, pleasure. But in that hall you get nothing. I will not follow you if you choose to go there, but if you change your mind, I am here waiting to show you more rooms that you haven't seen yet. Did I tell you about the Hall of Sensual Delight? You'd love that one. Almost everybody does."

But somehow instead of discouraging me, his words seemed to disgust me. I felt strangely drawn to this new hall. So I asked my remaining guide, "What is this hall called?"

"The Hall of the Master's Service," was his reply.

That sounded like a strange name to me and I was intrigued. We soon arrived at the hall. The entrance was definitely not as large or as ornate as the other halls we had visited. In fact it almost seemed to be hidden in a corner. It just didn't stand out in any way so I could easily have not noticed it if it weren't for my guide pointing it out.

We entered the hall and I peeked into some of the rooms. I saw people listening to and comforting hurting people. I saw people working at ordinary jobs. Everywhere I saw busy people: some working with their hands, some working with words, some with their voice. Often they were doing the very things I had seen being done in the other halls. But there was a difference on their faces.

I asked my guide, "What is the difference? They are doing the same things as in the other halls, but seem happy and content?"

"They work not for themselves but for the Master. Although the work is hard He makes it light," he replied.

"But I don't see anyone winning or getting anything?"

"That is true. No rewards or prizes are given here. If you seek those, best go to another hall," he explained.

"Then why should anyone toil so long and hard?" I asked.

"For two reasons," he replied. "First and foremost for love of the Master and secondly, to obtain a lasting reward that is more than just for the moment."

I didn't understand either of these answers. I looked again in other rooms and spent a long time observing. I saw them suffering. They were sick yet continued to serve others. They were beaten and did not fight back. Some endured physical hardship while others endured the mockery of friends and

family for their choice of halls.

I did not want to enter any of these rooms. "This game is no fun. I do not want to play this one." I said to myself. I wanted to return to another hall. I remember the one called Creature Comforts. This place was anything but that. Comfort seemed very attractive now. But there was something on their faces that drew me even stronger and I could not turn. This was so different than I had seen in any of the other halls. One guide had said they were all alike, but he was wrong. I was forced to agree with my current guide. This hall was unique. Why? I had to find out.

So I entered a room. A man approached whom I assumed to be the director. He extended a hand as if to take my pouch. I gave it to him expecting him to take out a token and give me back the pouch as had happened in all the other rooms. I waited and waited.

Finally I asked, "Please sir remove a token and return my pouch then show me to the game.

"This game is different." he replied.

"I know that," I said impatiently. "That's why I decided to play."

"No you don't understand. This game is really different. This game will cost all of your tokens." he said.

"I know to be really the best one often has to use all his tokens in a game. So what is different here?" I asked.

"When you give your pouch to me, you give me all your tokens to play the games in this hall until all your tokens are gone. You cannot get your pouch back to return to other halls. You will not have a choice over the specific game you will play. I will send you to the room and the game of my choice.

Knowing this do you still give me your pouch and tokens or do you want me to return it to you so you may go your way?"

This was almost too much to take in. I had to think. Was it worth it? I thought back to all the other games I had visited.

"Sir," I replied. "Your words are hard and your games are hard. But I have seen the others and your games alone are worthy of spending all my tokens. I accept your conditions. Lead me to the game you would have me play."

Having said that I raised my head and my eyes met His for the first time. I was startled and amazed. Never had I met a person with eyes like that. His gaze penetrated to the core of my being. I felt naked and wanted to hide, yet I also felt loved and accepted. I realized that this was not just the director of a hall of games, but the Master of the whole House

"Come," He said. "I will show you where I want you to play, for my work is easy and my burden is light. But first..."

I followed Him as one in a daze. I knew I had made the right decision, but I was totally unprepared for the emotions I was feeling. I went from despair, to hope, to joy, all in one moment. Then He turned towards me and took my hand and I saw the scars. I knew Him to be not only the master of this house but of all houses. He knew all about all the other games and all about me. I fell at his feet and wept.

He raised me to my feet and continued what He had started to say. "Before you start playing, I need to show you something that will give you comfort and hope when you are tired and hurting and feel you cannot go on."

My guide, who had been waiting, approached and the Master indicated I should follow him. I asked him, "Where do we go?"

"You have not asked what happens when a person's tokens are all gone. Come and I will show you. You know what it means to serve out of love. Now I will show you the reward."

We returned past some of the halls I had been in. I saw people being escorted out of these halls with a guide just like mine on either side. Most were angry. "What do you mean 'all my tokens are gone'? There must be a mistake. Go back and check again."

"You can't take me now. I just became president."

"I'm a billionaire. Look at all my money." Each one had a reason they should not have to leave.

The guide ignored the pleas, the curses, the threats, and the bribes. We walked out of the main door and on to the steps. The billionaire had his money taken away. The movie star lost her Oscar. The sports hero lost his trophy. Then they were led away empty handed. They had played in vain.

Then I saw others coming out also escorted, but they seemed happy and excited. "Who are these?" I asked.

"These are the ones from the Hall of the Master's Service. Watch what happens to them."

I saw them coming out of the door empty handed. There were no trophies, or goods, or money to show for their work, yet they were happy. As they started down the steps their guides gave them bags of gold, silver, and precious stones. "These will be for your crowns." the guides said as they were led away to the right.

Now I understood. I wanted to return to the Hall of the Masters Service as soon as possible. I turned around to look for my guide and when I looked back at the building I saw it shimmer for a moment and then burst into flames.

I heard a voice behind me saying. "The building was made of wood. It was only temporary for a season. Now the eternal begins. The faithful servants go to a building made of marble, ivory, and precious stones adorned with silver and gold instead of this building made of wood and paint. Choose carefully now before it is too late."

I awoke with a start to find myself in my own bed. It had been a dream, but it had seemed so real. I felt such a sense of emptiness and loss. But then the thought came to me. Maybe it wasn't all a dream and I could still find my way back to the Hall of the Master's Service.