A FABLE

 The man was 45 years old, which was almost ancient for those living in the Middle Ages in Central Europe.

 He was tired and searching for meaning. His wife had died of fever during the last plague, and his grown children had gone off shortly afterwards. He was not even sure if they were still alive. He had been a miller of grain his entire working life, but now he was off on a quest to find purpose in the twilight of his life.

 Gathering up the small amount of coins he had acquired over the years, the man set out walking across vast farmlands and over hills and streams. He stopped occasionally in small villages and their churches to rest and eat, but he avoided any larger cities. After a few weeks, he arrived at the edge of a strange, rather foreboding forest. Being curiously attracted, he entered.

 In a meadow lit with sunlight deep within the woods, he saw an astonishing sight. It was a living, real unicorn. He had heard legends about such mythical creatures, but he assumed it was just people's active imaginings. Yet here one actually stood before him. It had violet eyes with long, dark lashes. It had a single, spiraled horn which shone like silver, and its hooves were also shiny like silver. Its coat was pure white, like rich thick cream. The unicorn approached the man and spoke -- not in words, but instead inside the man's mind.

 "Be at peace. I mean you no harm. I am the last of my breed. When I am gone, there will be no more like me. I have come because you have needed me to give you an answer to a question which I can sense in your mind. I will send you on your way to the next creature who will further help you. Then you must wish within your heart for me to vanish forever. In this way, we will help each other. Do you agree?"

 The man replied aloud, "I do agree. But I always thought that you were a fantasy being, and not real. Yet here you stand before me in all of your magnificence. Can I ask you if dragons also exist, for nobody I know has ever seen one, yet we were all told stories of their existence since our childhoods."

 The unicorn responded in the man's mind, "Dragons were horrid creatures of evil and destruction, and they exist no longer. It is well that men will never know them again. Now, place your hand on my horn and think these words: 'As I will, so shall I become.' If you believe this truth with your entire being, it shall come to pass. You will then be transported to the realm of the firebird, and it will help you further on your journey. If you understand these instructions, the time has come for you to wish me out of existence with your heart as you promised. I am ready." The unicorn closed its violet eyes and waited. The man did as he was directed, and the beautiful beast slowly disappeared. Using the phrase he had been taught, and the power of his will, the man closed his eyes and was transported to the realm of the firebird.

 It was a land of shimmerings and vivid colors and bright sparkles. The mystical firebird came forward, all fiery and iridescent with blazing black eyes and a golden beak, and it spoke to the man's mind as the unicorn had done.

 "Down through the ages some have called me the phoenix, but I am truly known as the firebird. I have risen again and again from the ashes of my dead body. Now, I am the last of my kind. You must take my ashes before I re-animate and put them into the Magic Pond, so I will have my long-awaited eternal sleep. Do this for me and I will help you further on your journey." The firebird's feathers rippled with flames as it stood before the man in majesty and power.

 The man addressed the marvelous creature with his mind in awed agreement.

 "It is settled then," the firebird replied. "Remember these words: 'As I will, so shall I become.' Transport your being next to see pegasus. Like myself and the unicorn, it is the last of its breed. Now I must set my body ablaze one last time, so take my ashes to the Magic Pond and place them in the water so I can be released." Suddenly, a woosh of fire consumed the firebird until it was painlessly reduced to ashes.

 The man carefully scooped up the ashes once they had cooled, and gently placed them in his tunic pocket. Then he willed himself to appear near the pegasus.

 When he opened his eyes, the man was in yet another mysterious landscape. A sweet wind was blowing, scenting the air with unseen, unknown flowers. A short distance away, he saw a lone winged horse, the pegasus. The wonderful beast was brilliantly white, with piercing but calm blue eyes and huge, softly-feathered wings.

 "Welcome, friend. I am here to help you, as did my fellows the unicorn and the firebird. There is a hermit who has an answer to your question regarding the purpose and meaning of life. He lives in a simple stone hut near the Magic Pond. Your mind will take you there. But you must first bind my wings so that I will fall off the far cliffs you can see in the distance when I run at a full gallop one last time and leap to end my existence, for I too am the last of my breed and it is my time to leave this world."

 The man was terribly upset that he should be so commanded, but he realized the truth that all things must come to an end when their time is at hand. He found some long vines hanging from a tree, and cutting them with his knife, he fashioned them into knotted ropes. Then he lovingly bound the wings of the pegasus as instructed and hugged its neck, and watched with sadness as it galloped away and leaped off the distant cliffs until it was seen no more. A short time later, the man willed himself to see the hermit, by closing his eyes and again thinking: "As I will, so I shall become." He soon found himself back in a forested area. There was a simple stone hut nearby, and a large pond of water in the distance. Was this the Magic Pond? the man wondered. A curl of wood smoke rose from the hut's chimney. So the man made bold and walked up to the door of the dwelling and knocked.

 He was somewhat startled when a boy answered the door.

 "I was directed by the pegasus to see the hermit," the man offered.

 The boy replied, "I am the hermit. Perhaps you were expecting a wizened old man instead of what you see. Well, you might be surprised to learn that I am currently 188 years old. This is my third consecutive life. My first life was as a married farmer with children who lived to age 90. After that experience, I was reborn for a second life, with full memory of my first. I spent the next 90 years travelling the world alone -- first, I learned how to read and write, then I studied ancient texts in addition to the Bible and mastered other languages. I learned about philosophy and religion and other cultures. I even visited the Far East. I prayed and meditated, and fasted as paths to enlightenment. I learned the meaning of the phrase 'Know Thyself', and realized the importance of harmony, balance, and compassion. I concluded that wealth, power, and fame are meaningless goals unto themselves. Now, at age 8, in my third and probably final life, I am immersing myself in a study of the natural world -- the plants and animals, the changing seasons, the beauty and Godly order found deep within nature. I am in bliss now, in reverence and contentment with the sheer dynamic energy of the life force itself."

 The man looked into the boy's incredibly blue eyes, and believed the accumulated wisdom of his words. The boy had an angelic countenance, with perfect skin and pale blond hair. He seemed to glow with robust health and happiness.

 The boy hermit invited the man inside his hut, where they shared a simple meal. Then the boy continued.

 "You might wonder why I chose to live here alone, especially without a woman. As I already mentioned, I was married for many years. I also had several satisfying female relationships during my second life. I discovered that women are special beings in this world, for they are able to bring forth new life in the form of children. They are generally more practical and more firmly rooted in the world. All is as it should be. But I found that most women are uninterested in exploring higher consciousness and spiritual matters. They are less curious and more skeptical of any quests which transcend their roles as wives and mothers. In fact, they are secretly envious of the natural tendencies of men to want to reach beyond the physical world, for women believe that such yearnings take men away from the love and focus which women feel should be given to them alone. They feel threatened, though quite unnecessarily. Alas, so it is, and thus men must remove themselves from such feminine constraints in order to explore the higher realms of thought and experience."

 Having been once married as well, the man could not disagree with what the boy hermit had said.

 "Now, to come to your reason for being here. You yearn for an answer to your deepest question: Why are we here on earth and what is our true purpose? Come with me now to the Magic Pond, and we will see." The boy then led the man outside.

 It was a splendid weather day, with mild temperatures and a fresh breeze. Birdsong filled the pine-scented air. The pair walked to the edge of the Magic Pond.

 "Here you must drink, then pour a handful of water over your head. Next, you must find three stones and a secret wooden Grail. The stones must be pebbles of cinnabar, lapis lazuli, and malachite. After you find them and place them in the Grail, add water from the Magic Pond, close your eyes and humble your heart to God, and silently think your question. It will be answered, then you will be transported back to the place where you first began your journey. But the price you pay for such knowledge is that you will have no memory of either your quest to this place or to the answer that will be revealed. Rest assured, however, that your yearning to know life's truth will be satisfied, and on your eventual deathbed, you will be at peace and feel complete as you transition to the Higher Realm."

 The boy hermit embraced the man tenderly, then returned to his hut without saying another word.

 The man remembered the ashes of the firebird, which he had saved in his tunic pocket. He carefully emptied the pocket into the waters of the Magic Pond, where a slight hiss occurred as the ashes dissolved and finally vanished beneath the crystal liquid surface. Continuing as directed, he searched for the three stones and the wooden Grail. He discovered the wooden bowl first, as it rested within reach in a huge oak tree where a gnarled branch merged with the tree's main trunk. Next, he found the pebbles, one at a time, by looking carefully along the ground. Finally, he returned to the water's edge. He drank the cool refreshing water and placed a handful of it over his head. It made his hair pleasantly tingle.

 The sun was setting in a glorious evening descent as the man placed the three stones in the wooden Grail bowl and filled it with water. The vast sky overhead was an explosion of streaking colors of purple, pink, and orange. The man's physical tiredness had evaporated by now, as he thought his question with pure heart and closed eyes. The air was perfectly still as he opened his eyes to gaze into the Grail.

 First, he noticed the red cinnabar pebble slowly dissolve, as it revealed the word "BE." Next, he saw the blue lapis lazuli pebble dissolve to reveal the word "HERE." Finally, the green malachite pebble likewise dissolved, and revealed the word "NOW." The man considered the three word message, and was convinced in his soul of its eternal truth, and quietly shed tears of joy.

 When he looked up at the vast twilight sky to give thanks, he suddenly found himself back where his quest had began. But now the man was inexplicitly happy and at peace and no longer uncertain about why he had lived...

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski 2/17/16