

## Summary

### Siberian Lessons on Life, Love and Death

By Hans Wissema

#### Overview

Throughout history, man has pondered the meaning of life and tried to come to terms with haunting personal, relational and spiritual questions. With the demise of organised religion, many seek guidance in counselling, others in books that can enlighten them. Indeed, 'wisdom books' can be found on almost any bedside table. Some offer a collection of quotation or reflections, others are written from a distinctly religious background and clearly there is a large market for a book that is based on contemporary philosophy, offering insight in an entertaining yet accessible way. *Siberian Lessons on Life, Love and Death* fulfils this brief. It is written by a counsellor and consultant and based on the professional and personal experiences of a lifetime. It offers a unique angle. Lessons on life, love and death are based on a unifying philosophy and embedded in an adventurous travel story in which two protagonists develop alongside the Lessons. Helped by a good dose of humour, it makes for an easy read.

#### Story line

To deliver the Lessons, the author has created two protagonists, an abbot of a Siberian monastery and a young physicist. They travel from Moscow to Vladivostok on the Trans Siberia Express, calling in on some eighteen cities along the way. In each city the abbot answers questions from the local congregation. These dialogues are enhanced by private conversations between the abbot and his companion - and sometimes with other people they meet.

The Lessons are given from a humanistic, unorthodox and 'enlightenment' point of view, putting the abbot in the tradition of the Gnostics, Cathari and the little known movement of the Mennonites. The abbot comes into conflicts of increasing severity with the Church and, indeed, with himself. At the very end, after a dramatic breakdown and meeting the new love in his life, he decides to leave the Church.

His companion, Stephen, starts the journey as a 'nerd' who is more interested in computers than people. The confrontation with real life opens new horizons for him and step-by-step he discovers love. During the course of the book the two protagonists develop a deep friendship, leading to a kind of father – son relationship.

#### Target audience

The book is written for those who seek practical insight when facing life's formative moments: birth and death, transitions between the stages of life, the beginning and end of love, conflicts with parents and others. It gives original views on family life, work, art and religion.

It has also been written for those who want to have a deeper understanding of their motivation, their position vis-à-vis others, the way to bring up children, the role of sexuality, fear of life and depression.

#### The author

J.G. (Hans) Wissema (1942) is a Dutch professional life coach/ counsellor, management consultant and professor emeritus of technology management and entrepreneurship. His work took him to numerous countries including many places in Russia. The combination of counselling and consulting makes the author uniquely qualified to write this book. He has worked on it – on and off – for the past twelve years.

The author has substantial writing credentials, having published sixteen professional books on management, some of which have been translated into as many as eight languages, reprints running to twenty editions. Together, they have sold over 100 000 copies worldwide. His latest book, *Towards the Third Generation University*, was published by Edward Elgar in 2008 and has been translated into three languages.

#### Size

c. 84,000 words.

## Chapter Synopsis

The chapters are grouped together in four parts, each with a different theme. The characteristics of the places visited have been researched meticulously. They have been carefully chosen to match the contents of the respective Lessons, enhancing and adding further dimension, bringing them to life in the reader's mind.

### Introduction

The abbot and Steve meet and are introduced to the reader. The abbot is a high-ranking man of the Church. They decide on the journey. Stephen – the narrator – will make notes of the Lessons and he will be in charge of the organisation and publicity.

### **Basics**

The abbot introduces his basic philosophy. The two dimensions of happiness are introduced (security and development) as well as the three cylinder model, that will be used throughout the book. The role of the subconscious is explained. Historically, there is a pendulum between periods of fundamentalism and a world free of doctrine as created by the Gnostics, Cathari and Mennonites. Five personality archetypes are introduced and a discussion ensues about which types make good partners and which are best suited to specific work situations. The abbot distinguishes five stages of life, each lasting about twenty years. Stephen confesses his failed early love. The abbot worked for a company and lost his wife and child when he was forty. After that, he became a monk.

At the end of Part I the abbot has laid down his basic philosophy. Both protagonists realise they are in a process of transition.

### **Love**

The concept of universal love is introduced. Friendship, romantic love etc, are forms of universal love. Different kinds of friendship are discussed. The abbot gets a gentle reprimand from the young host abbot – his first criticism. Stephen is almost seduced by a young woman and does not know how to handle it. In lyrical prose, romantic love is discussed but the abbot also warns of perils. He launches his idea of a universal School of Love to which he will return in the Epilogue. Various forms of failed love are discussed. Not all true love will 'find a home' and the dimensions of enduring love are introduced. The abbot is rebuked in public for his liberal view on homosexuality. In discussing infidelity the abbot gets himself into more trouble. At the end of Part II, the abbot has expressed doubts about his position in the Church. Stephen is entering a new life without realising that he will eventually give up his career.

### **Life**

Part III discusses four aspects of life from a more practical angle: family life, professional life, artistic life and religious life. The concept of the basic human deficit is introduced. Art is appreciated at three levels, corresponding to the three cylinders. Three monks deliver a warning from the Patriarch – a fourth and very serious criticism for the abbot. For the time being, he gets away with it.

At the end of Part III the abbot is in serious trouble, which is reflected in poor health.

## **Death**

In the train, the abbot and Stephen have a crucial conversation in which the abbot announces his plan to leave the Church after finishing the journey. Stephen is also entering an impasse; he notices with regret that he does not know the first thing about life. The abbot explains what he sees as the meaning of life. He also discusses the role of God. In an emotional chapter the abbot talks about the death of a loved one. Resurrection and ascension are discussed.

Stephen develops a love relationship with the young doctor who travels with him but they are torn apart as she confesses she is married. In the final chapter, the abbot falls unconscious succumbing to a second and most heavy heart attack. He undergoes a lengthy operation and is then brought into intensive care where Stephen watches over him, wondering whether he will make it. The Lesson is about how to prepare for death.

### Epilogue and the School of Love

The abbot is operated on. He is reunited with an old friend who becomes a new love. Stephen also starts a serious relationship. The setting is optimistic but it is unclear to the very end whether the abbot will live or not.