

BIRDS IN THE TREES CAN ALL BE FRIENDS



FLOWER PETALS ON THE WATER CAN ALL BE WORKS OF ART

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When my younger brother was a boy of three he experienced for the first time a ringing in his ears. Filled with curiosity and wonder, he called our servant to his side, telling him to bend down and place his ear alongside his own, that he, too, might hear the sound. A few years ago I happened to be attending an art fair in a city to the south of my home. Some artist friends and I were invited by a gracious lady to spend the night in her home. It was Christmas Eve, and after supper our hostess urged us to accompany her on a walk through the city streets to listen to the carollers singing Christmas songs. On the way home, our gentle guide began to sing, in a sweet voice edged with curiosity and wonder, a refrain from one of the carols: "Do you see what I see? Do you hear what I hear?" As she sang the refrain over and over again, I could not help but ask myself: What were the beautiful things that she was seeing and hearing and I was not? In a world that bombards our senses with a profusion of sights and sounds and smells, who sees through the chaotic jumble to find paradise in the bud of a flower? Who hears with the inner-ear the "rippling of the fountain", or smells the sweet fragrance of the lone orchid in the empty valley? And who, having seen such sights, heard such sounds, smelled such fragrance will report with eager passion his findings to a waiting world? A poet, a painter - an artist of life.

There was a painter in Taiwan not long ago who excelled in the painting of peonies. He painted each blossom in a blend of colours: crimsons, yellows and purples, placing them in dark green foliage flecked with light. His peonies were very popular among the restaurant owners and shopkeepers, who were eager to buy them up as fast as he could turn them out. It was said among the merchants that, with this artist's peonies on the wall, business could not but prosper. The artist soon had much more on his mind than the simple act of capturing

in his work the image of the peony. While on a visit to the United States, I found myself one morning in a garden of peonies. Here I discovered and experienced for the first time their delicate beauty, the almost transparent texture of their petals, and the lovely perfume they released upon the bright morning's air. Alas, I searched the whole garden in vain for a peony petal that blended the colours of crimson, purple and yellow. And all that my mind's eye could conjure up as I thought of the artist in Taiwan was a vision of a busy merchant tabulating his orders and counting up the day's profits. For merchants to display artistic works in their places of business in order to enhance the beauty of the environment is something to be praised. To hang mediocre paintings on a shop wall to bring good fortune is a deplorable practice. An object of art is not a good luck charm. Art is, in fact, that which has the least "utility". Art seeks only to

discover, record and mediate beauty. Its sole function is to enrich the human heart, and it has no direct role to play in the commercial world of profit and loss. The role of the poet or painter on the stage of life is not the one with the longest lines, nor can it be measured by the amount of time he spends upon the stage. Often, the artist's most important moment may occur not at centre-stage but off to the side, or even when half-hidden in the wings; it is most likely to occur when he is not on the stage at all but sitting on the other side of the footlights, watching and listening with intense concentration as the action unfolds.



*From the Han Mountain Temple outside the city of Gusu,
The sound of the bell at midnight reaches the traveler's boat.*

Over the past 1200 years, how many human hearts have been saddened or delighted, found enlightenment or perhaps perplexity in these two simple lines of poetry? I, too, have been graced by their insights and have been moved by them to paint many landscapes of sea and sky, the tiny boat adrift upon the water, the wooden bridge leading to the ancient temple sheltered by the pine-tree forest rising on the distant shore. When at last I had the chance to visit Suzhou and see for myself the narrow canal, the wooden bridge, the Han Mountain Temple, and the

jumble of little boats running up to Gusu City, I found myself not only drawn deeper into the poetic image of Zhang Ji, but into the very heart of the poet himself. I thought of him traveling in a tiny boat still awake at midnight, suddenly hearing the pealing of the temple bell, a sound reaching him across the quiet waters, and how he caught in words eternity in a moment of time:

Deep and endless cosmos;
But one night of wind and moon.

I also thought of how fragile was that moment, and how easily it could have been lost forever to him, and to us his readers. Suppose he had decided to travel by land rather than by sea, or suppose his boat had been moored along with the others under the bridge and not adrift on the open water, or what if he had sought refuge in the city nearby, to ease the hours of his sleepless night? Would he then have heard the temple bell, or having heard it would not the distractions of Gusu have left little room in his heart to ponder its meaning?

Soon after Wang Wei had lost favour with the emperor, death robbed him of his gentle mother and loving wife. This series of misfortunes drove the poet into the high mountain-country to seek solitude among its rugged peaks and crashing rivers. Here he wrote these famous lines of poetry:

Rivers flow beyond this world,
And the mountain colours fade beyond perception.

This is what Wang Wei saw as he followed the course of the river until it dissolved in a blur among mountains half-covered by clouds with their sharp peaks rising. The river was like a bridge beckoning him on a journey from a visible, material world to find an invisible but nonetheless real, spiritual world. Wang's poem is a picture and his picture is a poem. His vision has been purified, his inner-calm restored. Thus is he able to perceive that other world hidden within the one he sees.

Having reached the river's end,
It is now time to sit and watch the clouds rising.

These words, written so long ago, still have relevance for us today. In the turbulence and confusion of modern life, few are aware of his truth that the end of one thing is not the end of everything but only the beginning of something new. It is not a time for despair, for slashing wrists or leaping off high buildings, but rather it is a time

to take stock, to sit and contemplate a new life, a new hope, that rises like the clouds to distant peaks. Wang Wei was a poet, a painter with words. His poetic instinct reached out to lay hold of the truth and beauty of life itself. He sought eternity beyond the cloud's edge and the river's end, and found the wisdom that gives joy and a sense of fulfillment.

Modern poets and painters may not stroll among the clouds or climb the jagged peaks of mountains, but their eyes and ears still seek out the life beneath the surface of the urban sprawl, that which lies hidden behind its concrete structures, its maze of highways, its relentless, pounding machinery. And their search does not go unrewarded, for life does not belong to the world, but the world to life. "Do not be anxious, for I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). No amount of man-made ugliness can block new life from emerging, and no amount of noise and clamor can drown out the sweet proclaiming of its presence. Listen to the song of a contemporary Japanese poetess:

The swelling bud of the flower
Opens its blossom only from within.

The poetess lives in the city of Chicago, a place of noise and bustle. But would anyone dare say of her that she has not "seen" nor "heard" the face and sound of eternity in the heart of a tiny bud? This kind of perception is what makes poets and painters different from others. What for some might be seen as an object to enhance the romantic atmosphere of a dinner by candlelight--the single bud in a silver vase--is for the poet and painter the revelation of eternity and the promise of life for all peoples. As our capacity to truly "see" and "hear" increases, so too does the face and voice of eternity become more and more distinct to us.

Pine seeds dropping
On the barren mountainside.

If your heart is a barren mountainside, the sound of pine seeds dropping can explode like the thunder of a storm in spring. I am reminded of what Karl Rahner once wrote: "From the beginning of non-being to the present, God has spoken but one word--URWORT: 'This is I.'"

God took the bread and said: "This is I." He held up the cup of wine and said: "This is I."

As the disciples struggled against the wind and waves, awash in a sea of threatening demons, the Lord came to them upon the waters like a

ghost from the deep, paralysing them with fear, and then He spoke: "Do not be afraid. It is I."

The Saviour was absent. The disciples lay exhausted across their oars, having battled all night against hostile forces and with nothing to show for it. Then, in the brightening of the eastern sky, they saw a figure upon the shore beckoning them to safety. "It is the Lord," cried the young and sensitive John, while impulsive Peter threw himself into the water and swam for shore.

"It is I." I am your neighbour; I am your Master and Lord; I am your servant; I am the vanishing glow of the setting sun; I am the sound of the small birds singing.

In the blood and fire, cries and groans of war, it is I. In the tears and laughter of a family reunited, it is I. I am the hand that reaches out to bless. The soft whisper of my voice rises above the bedlam of the marketplace; it thunders louder than the supersonic jets that crease the sky; it seeps like water on parched land into the innermost being of each and every person. "It is I." He who lays hold of this understanding and passes it on with joy to others is a poet.

This voice assumes a particular accent and face. It is like "an infant prior to childhood" (Daode Jing) or an ancient "with pure white hair" (Revelations 1:14). Those who gaze upon its truth, purity and awesome solemnity have called it "Eternity" or "the Dao". "It is as pale as the plum blossom and strong as Yellow Mountain, but as faint as the moon in spring." It is a source of fascination still, infatuating the human spirit, lifting it up in ecstasy, bringing it down with head bowed in prayer. It drove Xu Zhimo to his knees as he gazed in awe upon the field of buckwheat flowering in the flames of the setting sun; and because he was an artist, he was impatient until he had captured it in paint that others might share his awe and joy.

In the history of Chinese art, Gu Kaizhi, who lived in the 6th century, has been accorded the place of China's first portrait artist. He came upon his specialty in the following fashion. He had fallen in love with a local girl, but his courtship ended in failure. He could not get her out of his mind, and spent his days and nights thinking of nothing but her beauty. Finally, in desperation, he took his brushes and painted her portrait. History does not record whether the cure worked, but it does illustrate why one man paints while others turn to another trade. The painter is one whose heart is profoundly wounded by beauty. In the presence of beauty, he is reduced to silence and can only gaze upon it in tranquil peace. The late American artist Georgia

O'Keeffe, painted orchids as well as the bones of animals parched by the desert sun. She painted everything on such a grand scale that one painting alone was large enough to cover the entire wall of a living room. She did this because she felt that there was nothing in life too small not to absorb her entire attention, and no canvas large enough to capture its beauty. For her, a tiny flower was worth the dedication of a life-time.

There is about the artist a restless anxiety to find the face of eternity hidden in this world. He is much like Zaccheus, the tax-collector in Luke's gospel, who was too small to see above the heads of the crowd, and went in search of a tree to climb that he might see the one he yearned to see. And when he saw Him, he climbed down from his perch and surrendered his life to what he had "seen". The act of "seeing" and "hearing" focuses the attention on "the other", and away from the self. He who is able to "see" and to "hear" forgets himself and is drawn out of himself to become absorbed in what is outside himself. I find in this a characteristic of true discipleship. "I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see, and never saw it; to hear what you hear, and have never heard it" (Luke 10:24). If the disciple has a gift for words, he will write what he has heard in poetry. If he is a painter, he will capture what he has seen with the strokes of a brush. But no special gift is needed for one who wishes to become an artist of life. He who has ears to hear and eyes to see can find in the world about him the beauty and truth that is there. We all can see our Creator in the eyes of our neighbour, having once removed the beam from our own.

The poets and painters of ancient days saw and heard eternity in a single moment. The disciple of Jesus is more fortunate, for he knows that eternity is a Person, a Word with a Name. How can we not then celebrate and sing, as my gentle hostess sang on that Christmas eve long ago: "Do you hear what I hear? Do you see what I see?"

The birds in the tree sing of our friendship; petals on the lake are each our work of art, for all that exists between heaven and earth mirror Him and speak His Name.