

Walking with your own lamp

Raja Mohanty

“Clay can be shaped into a vessel;
It is the space within that makes it useful.”

Lao Tse

I read these lines by Lao Tse, when I was a teenager and they must have made a deep impression, for I remember them even now. And since I write this article for a Chinese magazine I would like to begin by invoking the wisdom of ancient China.

It must have been an unusual day in Bangalore, for I had come to a decision that would change the course of my life. I was working for a tele-communications company as a junior engineer, charged with the task of making calculations for optical cables. Sam Pitroda was ushering in policies that would connect far flung places in India and though I found optical fibres interesting, my field of work would, on that fateful day, transition from optical technology to visual communications.

During my undergraduate studies at IIT Bombay, the twentieth century Indian philosopher, Jiddu Krishnamurti, had visited the campus and spoken of things that had a considerable impact on my impressionable mind. I also had an opportunity to listen to him at the Sir JJ School of Art, a place I would revisit at a much later date to find answers that my studies in science and design did not have.

Much later, while listening to yet another talk, I came to understand that the question of human existence interested me more than teachings that could help me get by in the world. From this grew a love of spaces that were open and wide. I trekked in the mountains and painted them when I returned. Slowly, somewhere, the realization began to dawn that the old tools, the old words, were no longer useful to me. I needed to discard them and adopt a new language so as not to stagnate.

I found most people around me caught up with matter and materiality. What gave me a high was the spirit. What fascinated me was the look in someone's eye and not the clever words that people learn to speak and certainly not the display of wealth and riches. What appealed to me was people who had retained their simplicity and beauty despite the passage of years. What touched me was the unexpected gesture, or at times, just a gaze.

Krishnamurti had spoken of the importance of listening and of the importance of living without prejudices. He had also spoken of fear. Several years later, I would hear another statement that would make its way into the deeper recesses of my mind. It said that some of the most important decisions in our life are taken because of love, or out of fear. On that fateful day in Bangalore, I must have been without fear. After turning in my papers for the job, I found myself in the Valley School, on the outskirts of Bangalore. This was one of the many schools that Krishnamurti had inspired.

Though I was assisting in the classroom meant for physics, I found myself beginning visual studies. Sukant, the resident art teacher in Valley School, was to be my first unofficial teacher, commenting on my initial sketches and doodles. Flipping

through the pages of my sketchbook, he had paused to tap his index finger on some doodles. "I like that" he said. I wondered what made him say so. Much later, I grew very fond of the squiggles of the Spanish painter Joan Miro. Neither for love nor for money could I explain to you why this was so. It was then that I came to understand that to be blessed with the capacity to love is one of the most incredible gifts to have. One just loves. There is no why. This understanding clears up a lot of confusion that may otherwise arise. Slowly I came to understand why Sukant had liked those doodles.

There are some ideas that whisper and unless your ears are alert, it is likely that the whisper will pass you by, unheeded. Indeed what you see is what you want to see. What you hear is what you want to hear. At the risk of repeating a story you might know, I will do so. It is a story that reminds me to listen to ideas that whisper. Once upon a time, a city-man and an aborigine were walking down the streets of Mumbai. The aborigine stopped and cocked his head. His eyes lit up as he pointed to a magpie seated on the electric pole above. "How did you spot the robin in spite of the screech of all this traffic?" asked the city-man. At that instant, a coin slipped out of the aborigine's hand. The crowd of pedestrians around them stopped and turned to stare at the coin as it rolled across the street. The clink as it hit the ground had been barely audible but the crowd had heard it loud and clear. "So you see my friend," said the aborigine to the city-man, "We hear what we want to hear." It is as simple as that.

The first illustrated story-book that I did is about different roses. Each of them proclaim their superiority over the others, and eventually start fighting. They are on the verge of destroying one another when a little rosebud gently reminds them that they are all roses. I see different roses fighting around me even today. Once in a while, I have tried to be the little red rosebud but have realized that it is best to let the roses have their way. It is important, however, that the little rosebud does not forget to give the message it is supposed to give. For if indeed it forgot, things would be very, very different.

In the summer of 1992, I remember walking through a pine forest in the foothills of the Himalayas. All of a sudden a storm broke out. The wind was so strong that the pines snapped like matchsticks and came crashing down. When nature reveals herself with such ferocity one can only be a mute spectator. Much awed by her display, our entire group walked on in silent prayer. Eventually we emerged from the forest and sheltered for the night in a small shack. I began the sketch shown here, late that evening, and completed it bit by bit at the end of each day. It is said that if you visit the Himalayas even once, they will call you back till you die. Over the next few years, I made several trips to walk in this beauty and let the wilderness creep into my being and shape my silences.

Travelling during peak-hour traffic in a Mumbai local is the anti-thesis of walking in Himalayan meadows. Every day, nearly six million people get packed into a thousand local trains to travel to work and return to their homes. At eleven o'clock on a weary night it has astounded me to see a kid peddle his wares in a local train. He was blowing into the balloons that had a whistle at the nozzle. When released, a jet-like principle would push the balloons across the length of the aisle. The funny squeal of the whistle would bring a light

to the tired eyes. While working on a book on the history of science and technology of the Indian subcontinent, I made many a trip during peak-hour traffic. I have often dreamt of peddling one book, walking down the aisle of a Mumbai local. It would have to be on some lazy Sunday afternoon for I do not have the courage that these little kids have. What the book will be about I do not know, some nonsense-rhyme about Mumbai perhaps. And perhaps for company, I will have with me a kid who plays the *ektara* - an instrument with one string) and his sister who sings beautifully.

Romain Rolland, the French writer, very poignantly described the life of a musician in his book *Jean Christophe*. Many years after I read the book, I had the opportunity of exhibiting some drawings done as a tribute to some of the passages in the book.

During a trip to the Ajanta caves, I had been fascinated by the remoteness of the place chosen by the Buddhist monks. These lines written at Ajanta were to serve as the invitation for the exhibition:

“In the depth of a forest
You can hear
A bird you cannot see.
No matter how hard you try
You cannot see.
Perhaps there is no bird.
Just a song hidden within the leaves.”

I have since then, moved away from the established “art-world”. I still visit galleries and exhibitions and installations and on rare occasions do find a spark in the walled enclaves. However, what interests me is the art of life and living.

The world, and as a corollary the “art-world”, has been permeated by concerns that lack in truth or beauty. The language it speaks is so sophisticated that it fails to inspire the exalted emotions experienced when one stands in front of temples and churches, sculptures and painting from yester years. The sacred has been substituted by a celebration of the banal. Feudal practices masquerade under the mask of democracy. The illusory notion of having developed a greater mastery over nature and the mysteries of the universe, has killed the communion that the human soul could achieve in the presence of beauty.

Scientific thinking had led to a questioning of dogma and given birth to democracy. Drunk with its achievements it presents a face that is ugly and distorted. The heightened sense of aggression, encountered the world over, is a direct outcome of the arrogance of such beliefs. Grace and compassion stand mute, nailed to the cross. Puny minds search for new frontiers in space while closer home, people get killed in wars.

The mistaken notion of the survival of the fittest that came out of a narrow world-view that claimed to be scientific, seized the imagination of the restless. Great ideas such as co-existence and tolerance, were laughed upon as naïve and simplistic. Such are the characteristics of the age that prides itself on being informed.

Faced with a blitzkrieg and onslaught of information, the restless, transform into mutated monsters with teeth. I am afraid of them and keep away. I do not lament the loss of innocence, nor do I long for the return of the glorious past.

Not very far away love and meditation stand hand in hand, welcoming those who still listen. The end of thought is the end of dilemmas and rhetoric. It signals the beginning of possibilities.

I remember reading that light from the sun cannot reach the depths of the ocean. Some fishes that live deep down, like fire-flies have a light of their own. Once while in an aquarium in Paris I was delighted and amazed to see the variety of manifestations of life. There were fishes that were frisky, fishes that were almost transparent, fishes that looked very serious and solemn. On another occasion while waiting for a friend in a club, I was observing people as they arrived...and in a moment of inspiration it struck me that people are just like fishes. Some are fat, and some wear ties; some look worried, and some have big bulging eyes; some carry torches, and some who live in the depths of life seem to have a light that shines through their eyes.

A brief note about the author:

Raja Mohanty, graduated with a degree in electrical engineering, but now pursues a career in visual arts and design. He writes and illustrates books for “grown-up-children” and hopes that someday he will be able to create something delightful for children. He is involved in collaborative work with traditional painters for the creation of illustrated books. He also teaches at the Visual Communication programme at the Design Centre at I.I.T. Bombay. He can be contacted at rajam@iitb.ac.in