

LESSONS FROM ROBERT BLY'S BARN

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"Robert Bly in This World"

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Although I was born in Boston and grew up on the east coast, my parents were both from Minneapolis and so, when it came time to go to college, I applied to the University of Minnesota and--having been denied admission to several fancy East Coast schools--arrived on campus in the fall of 1962. One evening when I was still a senior in high school I took out the University catalog so as to daydream about my future as a college boy. The map of the campus was a bit of a surprise. In the middle sat a large building labeled Cow Barn. Nearby were others: Sheep Barn, Pig Barn, Cereal Rust Lab, Weed Research Down at the bottom right was a tiny building: Liberal Arts. I hadn't realized how far west I was about to travel!

It was a great relief, of course, when my grandfather picked me up at the train depot and took me to the Minneapolis campus, not to what we used to call the Cow Campus over in St. Paul. Then as now the Minneapolis campus itself was huge--I think there were 30,000 students at the time, a large number to be sure but useful to me because out of all those thousands it turned out that there were half a dozen who became real soul mates: Jim Moore, Patricia Hampl, Garrison Keillor, Sam Heins, Francis Galt, and more.

The first time I met Robert Bly we were both on a bus going to an antiwar march held in Washington, D.C. on November 27, 1965. I had no idea he was a writer until, a few months later, Garrison invited him to give a reading on campus. Robert would have been in his mid-thirties then; he was full of energy, full of opinions, highly knowledgeable about modern poetry, and editing a wild little magazine called *The Sixties*. It soon developed that some of us would drive out to Madison, Minnesota to try to figure out what this fellow was all about. The first time Jim Moore and I made that trip we stopped on the way and bought a pork roast, my mother having taught me that guests should always arrive with a house gift of some sort. This was a raw roast of course, not a prepared meal, but I think it was gratefully received nonetheless. In those days lots of young poets showed up in Madison bearing no meat at all.

At the time of that first visit, Robert had just moved an old one-room schoolhouse onto his farm to use as his study. Initially, however, it was going to serve as a honeymoon cottage for James and Annie Wright. Jim and I were put to work helping to fix it up for them. Our first job was to dig the outhouse pit. Such were the entry requirements for those wishing to enter the world of poetry in the mid-1960s.

On a later trip to Madison I interviewed Robert for *The Lamp in the Spine*, a little magazine edited by Jim Moore and Patricia Hampl. Looking back at the interview now I see that I had big questions on my mind: “Do you believe in God?” I asked, and “Are you afraid of death?” In his answers Robert kept refusing to engage with my abstractions, his habit always being to think in images. In response to one question about spiritual life he had this to say:

There's a skin or hide between ourselves and our inner being. And in the West that skin is very thick. Inside us there's a sea and that sea is your inner life, your spiritual life, and your sexual impulses--everything you've gotten from the memory stores of evolution. Then there's the outside world made of buildings and automobiles. And these two worlds can't rub against each other. It's too painful. Therefore you develop a hide exactly like a cow develops a hide. You don't want her guts to rub against the barn. [Hyde 50-51]

Thus did my studies begin on the Cow Campus after all, with Farmer Bly as one of my tutors.

He had many lessons to teach. A primary one had to do with solitude, something that has since played an important role in my own life. Robert has often told the story of his own initiation:

I went to New York and I lived in a room by myself... I had about two and a half years of solitude which troubled me and which drove me out of my mind; but nevertheless, in the course of that I understood something.

There are many things to be understood through solitude. All cultures seem to have the idea that human beings can be renewed by quitting the familiar, either in fact or in imagination, and going into the desert. In some traditions the young must go into silence for a period before they can emerge as real human being. It isn't enough to take instruction from the community; you must also become aware of our collective ignorance, as Henry Thoreau used to say, with how vast it is and how fertile it can be. Thoreau is the great example in this country of a man experimenting with solitude. He went to Walden Pond to step outside the village proper, on the chance he might learn something not talked about in the town. The silence of solitude is itself a teacher.

"Silence is audible to all men..." Thoreau once wrote. "She is when we hear inwardly, sound when we hear outwardly." [Thoreau 391]

There is a narrative, a plot as it were, to the experience of solitude. Certain things happen as the time unfolds. At one point in an interview collected in a Michigan Press book, *Talking All Morning*, Robert remarks on what happens if we quit the chatter of social life:

Psychic energy can be drained by talking. My experience is that when, by means of solitude, the psychic energy is prevented from dispersing, then, after five or six days the psychic energy takes rhythmic forms.... [Talking 121]

That's actually quite deep into solitude: if you've made it to day five or six, you are doing very well. The first few days are very hard, or at least they have usually been for me. This is partly because going off by yourself is an implied insult to the community or to your loved ones and they may threaten to withdraw their affection if you leave, or at least you imagine that they might. We desire the love and respect of our community; if you step away from it, "a terrible fear comes," as Robert has said. And yet: "What the collective offers is not even love..., but a kind of absence of loneliness." [Talking 308]

Clearly, there are gates or barriers standing in the way of solitude. Fear is one of them; depression is another. To speak only of my own experience, for years now I have arranged periods of retreat for myself, time simply to read and to write. Years ago when I began such retreats I would often find myself depressed for the first day or two. I'd lie on the floor wondering why I had been so stupid as to be a writer. Why hadn't I become a carpenter or car mechanic? Why hadn't I found something useful to do with my hands? In this state my own work always looks stupid and obvious, my sentences stumbling and labored. I mention this period of gloom and doubt partly because if that's what's waiting for you then you'd better have some sort of container to hold you while you go through it. Time and enclosure: these are what a writer must have. Talent helps, but the yield may be small without time and enclosure.

My retreat depressions are usually followed by simple acceptance rather than elation. Gary Snyder has a poem called "Why Log Truck Drivers Rise Earlier than Students of Zen" that describes waking early to drive the rig up into the mountains for a day's labor. It ends with flat declarations: "Thirty miles of dust. / There is no other life." There is no other life. You may as well get to work.

And once you get to work you can sometimes, in solitude, forget your own self-judgment. I recently had a chance to spend three weeks alone in a house in a very small town in West Texas; during the second week I ran into a friend on the street that asked, "How are things going?" I couldn't say! I had no idea how things were going. In solitude, if you are lucky, there comes a point when you are just doing the work, not thinking about whether it will please someone else, or even whether it pleases you. As Flannery O'Connor once wrote, "in art the self becomes self-forgetful in order to meet the demands of the thing seen and the thing being made." There is judgment internal to the art, to be sure ("Does this work on its own terms?") but blessedly the other sorts of judgment can fall away. The work can absorb you the way good soil can absorb the rain.

The final piece of the narrative of solitude appears when you reenter the world. If you've really made contact with inner life, or really become self-forgetful, then you return with a different quality of attention. When I was done with my weeks in Texas I found myself in the El Paso airport where the loudspeakers were saying, over and over again, "The Department of Homeland Security Authority has set the terror alert level at orange." Every so often they would also announce that there were hand-held defibrillators located near the restrooms. I'd heard none of these things before my retreat; they were surely there, but as accepted background noise. Now they seemed ominous and weird; I'd somehow walked into a land whose citizens heard disembodied voices constantly warning of bombs and heart attacks.

To spend time away from the culture's repeating noise allows you to notice the incongruity between what might be and what actually is. In solitude lies a promise of fresh speech and fresh action. Again I think of Thoreau: having spent two years at the pond he was able to say clearly why he was a tax resister. He had something new to say, a translation for his neighbors of what the inner ear hears in silence.

Which brings me to a final point about solitude, one that I don't think people always understand, and that is that being alone is connected to being with other people. "It was first in solitude that I really felt an affection for the human community," Robert has said. [*Talking* 10] After all, if you can't be at ease with yourself, how can you be at ease with others? If you feel no affection for yourself, good luck feeling affection for your homeland.

This brings me to a second lesson that many of us studied in Robert Bly's barn, one having to do with the soul work of connecting the inner and the outer worlds. I'm going to build my description of this work around two of Robert's sentences, the first of which comes from his great antiwar poem published in 1970, "The Teeth-Mother Naked at Last": "[The Vietnamese] are dying because gold deposits have been found among the Shoshoni Indians." [*Teeth-Mother* 18] The second sentence is not printed anywhere I know of; it's inscribed in my memory. At one of the many public events around the Vietnam war protests I remember Robert saying something like this: "We are killing men with black hair because the Minnesota Historical Society owns the scalp of Little Crow."

Nobody in my family ever spoke sentences like these; very few people do, actually, and I'm going to spend a minute reflecting on how they operate.

The first thing to say is that they contain history and some history about Little Crow is therefore in order. Little Crow was a Dakota Sioux, one of the leaders of the Sioux Rebellion of 1862. A decade before that date the Sioux had entered into a treaty with the U.S. government in which they agreed to settle along the Minnesota River in exchange for land, annuities, and certain other goods. The U.S. Senate then reneged on this deal whereupon the Sioux tried to drive European settlers out of Minnesota. This act of rebellion failed and a year later Little Crow was shot by a farmer while foraging for berries near Hutchinson, Minnesota. The farmer took the body into town where the townspeople mutilated it, dragging it through the streets with firecrackers stuck in the ears and dogs picking at the head. The farmer scalped him, there being a bounty on the Sioux in that time and a double bounty for Little Crow. When I was in college, both the scalp and the skull were owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

The sentence about "the scalp of Little Crow" contains history, then, but it is swift history. It isn't a meditation on the past; it isn't an ode to the Confederate dead. The sentence jumps between two moments in time and in doing so reveals a connection to the Surrealists. The Surrealists famously juxtaposed things that no one would normally think of putting together as in the famous line from Lautréamont: "The chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella." Such juxtapositions are the stuff of dreams of course, the Surrealists in the 1920s being very much interested in the dream work of Freud and other early psychoanalysts.

Knowledge in each of these cases--in dreams, in Surrealism, and in Robert's practice--comes to us in images. Regarding Little Crow and history you could of course say something like "There is a statistical correlation between nineteenth-century racial attitudes among immigrant populations from Northern Europe and the difficulty of winning the hearts and minds of our allies in Southeast Asia." But that would be a scalped sentence. It has no living animal body in it and therefore no feeling life and therefore little chance of giving birth to ethical or spiritual consciousness, let alone to action. Images in Robert's works are not simply a technique or a matter of craft; they arise from a sense of how the human mind functions in its fullness, how it engages with the world. In an early essay of his about working with images he reminds us that we had a period of "imagism" in this country, one associated with Pound and Williams. Robert differentiates that movement from what he and others were trying to do in the sixties by saying that the earlier "imagism" as largely "picturism":

An image and a picture differ in that the image, being the natural speech of the imagination, cannot be drawn from or inserted back into the real world. It is an animal native to the imagination. Like Bonnefoy's "interior sea lighted by turning eagles," it cannot be seen in real life. A picture, on the other hand, is drawn from the objective "real" world. "Petals on a wet black bough" can actually be seen. [*American* 20]

In one sense the lines I've quoted contain the kind of pictures that can be found in real life; you could actually go see Little Crow's scalp if you wanted to. But you cannot see the whole of what that line contains because the full image leaps between two centuries. This is a dissecting table where the Indian Wars have bumped into napalmed Vietnamese farmers. That juxtaposition departs from what many of the Surrealists did, many of them not being so interested in politics. Marcel Duchamp, for one, spent the second war in Argentina playing chess. The surrealism of the "Teeth-Mother," on the other hand, is closer to that found in poems written by Pablo Neruda during the Spanish Civil War. Its imagistic density manages to combine spiritual questions (can you feel compassion for distant strangers?), psychological claims (unexamined inner life produces violence in the outer world), and political demands (the war must be stopped). It is political poetry in the simple sense of speech that cannot be aligned with the speech coming from the government or the television. There was, after all, an official narrative about the Vietnam War that included things like the Domino Theory (if Vietnam fell,

so would Laos, then Thailand...); to speak of Little Crow's scalp in that context was to offer a counter narrative (of the kind most likely to arise in solitude and retreat).

"Political concerns and inward concerns have always been regarded in our tradition as opposites, even incompatibles," Robert has said; the promise of what might be called "active solitude" is that it can dissolve that supposed opposition: "the political poem comes out of the deepest privacy." [*Talking* 98-99] Where that isn't the case, where inner and outer remain unrelated, then the task of the poet is to thin out the husk, the skin or the hide that we grow to separate the two--to thin it out not, however, to be that poor cow dragging her guts against the barn, but to replace the protective skin of indifference and inattention with a better, livelier membrane. The name of that membrane is poetry.

In this case it is a poetry of both belief and action. Notice that the quotations I've offered are both declarative sentences. Each declares its given perception to be true. They are assertions of faith, therefore, of the faith that the world can be read coherently, that there is a way to do the Hermes-task of drawing meaning from apparent nonsense, or from beneath the false-meanings that the collective offers.

We know the road; as the moonlight
Lifts everything, so in a night like this
The road goes on ahead, it is all clear. [*Selected* 37]

First comes faith, then comes action. For if these perceptions are clear and true, what shall we do? There are many stories about action from that period, of course. To speak of only one of these, in the spring of 1968 Robert received the National Book Award for *The Light Around the Body*. The date matters because a few months earlier our government had begun to arrest a number of public figures who were counseling draft resistance. The Reverend William Sloane Coffin, Dr. Benjamin Spock, and three other men had been indicted for conspiracy and put on trial. Robert gave his Book Award acceptance speech on March 6, 1968 and at the end of it he gave his award check to Mike Kempton of The Resistance, saying: "I hereby counsel you...and other young men...to defy the draft authorities--and not to destroy [your] spiritual lives by participating in this war." [*Talking* 108] That sentence is what language theorists call "a speech act": it didn't just say something, it did something (it broke the law).

We often speak of Henry Thoreau as having been a solitary or asocial person but in doing so we forget that *to publish* means *to make public*. We forget, that is, that writing and publishing

are forms of social engagement, of combat even. There is a wonderful essay by the British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips that touches on this matter of public combat. In an essay is called "Equals" (in a book by the same name) Phillips set out to imagine what equality might really mean, and why we often resist it. In the course of his argument he makes a nice distinction between two kinds of fighting: *antagonism* and *agonism*.

With antagonism we try to crush our opponents and silence them; agonism, on the other hand, welcomes conflict, entertains it, enjoys it even. An *agon* in ancient Greek drama was a verbal contest between two characters on the stage, each of whom appeals to the audience, neither having any necessary claim to the truth. Greek democracy borrowed from drama in this case, for democracy flourishes whenever antagonism can be converted into agonism, the contending of equals. Robert's literary criticism and his political interventions have always been democratic in the sense of welcoming agonistic exchanges. He once said that most American criticism is out to either destroy enemies or praise friends. He suggested and practiced a third form: "Those who are interested in the same sort of poetry [should] attack each other sharply, and still have respect and affection for each other." [*Talking* 160]

Whether they were directed toward friends or not, there were always fighting words in Robert's little magazine. As if to announce what was to come, the first issue of *The Fifties* contained these lines from William Blake:

O young men of the New Age! Set your face against the ignorant hirelings! For we have hirelings in the Camp, the Court, and the University who would, if they could, forever depress mental and prolong corporeal war. [*Fifties* 1 44]

Depress mental and prolong Corporeal War: Robert's antiwar poetry does the opposite. It engages in mental combat so as to depress the corporeal. I deeply believe that there are men and women my age who are alive today because we had people like Robert doing that work in the sixties. We cannot know who they are but they are among us. The sixties are often now maligned, imagined only in terms of sex, drugs, and licentiousness; but to describe them as such covers up the more significant story line. The antiwar movement actually did something; so did the civil rights movement; so did the wave of feminism that began at the end of the sixties. Each of these changed our world immeasurably. "You can't fight City Hall" is a rumor spread by City Hall. There were and there are hierarchies in this nation that depend on gender inequality, racial

inequality, wealth inequality, and military force; in the late sixties they briefly lost control. They would like us to forget that and so they mock that period, but don't believe them. Ruth Bader Ginsberg now wears a black robe because Richard Nixon arrested Dr. Spock for burning draft cards.

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I began with a story about visiting Robert in Madison; I'll end with a related story told to me by John Stratton Hawley, professor of Hinduism and Indian religions at Columbia University. Hawley once told me about a famous Sanskrit scholar who lived in Berkeley, California; this man was working at home one day when there came a knock on the door. When he answered a man was standing there who said he wanted to see him. The scholar said that he was very busy; perhaps they could make an appointment. The visitor explained that he had come all the way from India, that he was an admirer of the man's work, and that he just wanted to see him for fifteen minutes or so. The scholar relented and admitted his visitor asking him what specifically he wanted. "Oh nothing," the man said, "I really just wanted to see you." He sat there for fifteen minutes watching as the scholar went back to work. Then he left.

There is a tradition in Hindu culture called *darshan*. It means *to lay eyes on* or *to behold*. When we were undergraduates at the University of Minnesota it was important to us that we see some poets. There were several in the state, and we used to go look at them. All young people do this, I think. Robert did it when he was young--he went to see William Carlos Williams; he went to see Pablo Neruda. Surely there is a *darshan* of the book as well, a laying of eyes on authors and traditions long past, in Robert's case a witnessing of Rilke, Juan Ramón Jiménez, Jakob Böhme and so many others. I mention these long-dead spirits partly to move away from the necessary grandiosity that attends a celebration like this. We're here to celebrate Robert Bly, but to say only that is like saying we honor the door of a barn when the point is to open it and see the animals inside.

I brought one of those animals with me, something I found in Robert's barn forty years ago: a pamphlet of ten poems by Issa. Here are three of them:

Now listen, you watermelons --
if any thieves come --
turn into frogs!

This line of black ants --

Maybe it goes all the way back
to that white cloud?

The old dog bends his head listening...
I guess the singing
of the earthworms gets to him.

On the first page of this little pamphlet we read: "This booklet is a gift, and is not to be sold."
I've had this pamphlet for forty years; I brought it along to give away--to Jim Lenfestry who
helped to organize this conference.

As you must know, I've written a book about gift-exchange and poetry, and I sometimes
wonder if this sentence from this pamphlet wasn't a seed for that work. I recently read a remark
by Bob Dylan about the first time he listened to Woody Guthrie: hearing Guthrie's songs, Dylan
says, left him "feeling more like myself than ever before." That's a very strange remark if you
think about it. A young man of 18 or 19 listens to an older man's art and it makes him feel like
himself.

As for me, I've spent many days with Robert Bly during which I have felt quite like
myself. It's quite mysterious, really. Mysterious to be born into a human body. Mysterious to
have the gift of consciousness. Mysterious to mingle one mind with another. Wonderful to find
friends and companions whose spirits enter into our own, enlarging us and letting us know we
are not alone. How fine for many of us to have found, when we were young, such a roomy cow
barn out in Western Minnesota.

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