

Daily Meditation 2-9-26

Leonard Cohen on Saintliness, continued

Good morning.

It is our privilege these days, beginning Saturday and today and tomorrow too, to spend some time entertaining with Leonard Cohen, who I consider one of the great musicians and lyricists of our time. He has a lot to say to us, and he says it in subtle and versed in lively ways and very diversely.

Artists have the luxury of offering their images for our imaginations and our souls without necessarily rational definitions. One image can mean many things to us. And as many of you have heard me say, every prophet is an artist, that prophets use art, symbols, pictures, as their means of waking people up and giving them instructions and insight and excitement and energy to carry on the struggle for healing, compassion and justice.

It is certainly true of Leonard Cohen. As I point out in Saturday's daily meditation, he was Jewish and a Buddhist. And he was also thoroughly acquainted with the Jesus story and Christianity. He grew up in Canada amidst many Christians.

The very first experience I had with Leonard Cohen, I'd never heard of him before, was when I was living in Southern France, writing my doctoral thesis there, and a friend visited me who was working on his doctorate in Germany. Bob Ludwig was his name. He was a lay theologian, and I remember we walked along the beach in Biarritz. And he sang the song "Suzanne." And I was really taken by it, really taken by it, just found the music itself to be moving, but also the lyrics to be so enticing and unpredictable and full of imagination. And you may recall that in that song, it begins,

Suzanne takes you down to her place near the river. You can hear the boats go by. You can spend the night beside her -- and you know that she's half crazy, but that's why you want to be there. And she feeds you tea and oranges that come all the way from China. And just when you mean to tell her that you have no love to give her, then she gets you on her wavelength, and you have to travel with her, and you want to travel blind, and you know that she will trust you, for you've touched her perfect body with your mind.

And then he talks about Jesus. And again, we were walking along the sands of the ocean when I heard this for the first time. And Bob Ludwig was a good singer, by the way.

Jesus was a sailor when he walked upon the water. And he spent a long time watching from his lonely wooden tower -- about the cross, obviously -- and when he knew for certain, only drowning men could see him -- only drowning men could see him, that you kind of have to be in trouble to get the full meaning of this Jesus story -- he said, All men will be sailors, then, until the sea shall free them -- all men, all people, will be sailors, will be walking on the waters -- but he himself was broken long before the sky would open, forsaken, almost human. He sank beneath your wisdom like a stone. And you think you maybe you'll trust him, for he touched your perfect body with his mind.

To set free perfect body. Basically asks the question, who has a perfect body? Well, we all have a perfect body if it's working, and if it's serving our mind and heart and soul and spirit, it's pretty darn perfect.

Now Suzanne takes your hand, and she leads you to the river. She's wearing rags and feathers from Salvation Army counters. I love how he gets down to the particular and the specific and the everyday. And the sun pours down like honey on our lady of the harbor. There again, he's incorporating Catholic kind of language, our lady in the harbor. And she shows you where to look among the garbage and the flowers. There are heroes in the seaweed. There are children in the morning. They are leaning out for love, and they will lean that way forever, while Suzanne holds the mirror. And Suzanne, who has supposedly a perfect body, remember, is half crazy, And you want to travel with her, and you want to travel far. You trust her because she's touched her perfect body with their mind.

Suzanne has a perfect body. We have a perfect body. There's this mind and our bodiliness that come together. A beautiful poem is a song, but I think it brings up so many themes that are truly theological in the best sense of the word spiritual.

Now in the videos accompanying Saturday's meditation, you have one song, "The Anthem," and the other is "Hallelujah." Again, if you look at these from the point of view of the Four Paths of Creation Spirituality, you find them very well treated. "Hallelujah," obviously, the very word is a word of praise and affirmation. It's all about the Via Positiva: Hallelujah is one word that's employed to praise, hallelujah. But he talks about, of course, the baffled King David, who was a sinner in many ways, so he was confused and baffled and all the rest. But nevertheless, he was able to praise. He was able to sing hallelujah. And as he says, *there's a blaze of light in every word, it doesn't matter which you heard, the holy or the broken hallelujah.*

So "Hallelujah" is bigger than morality, bigger than just good and bad or right and wrong or holy or broken. At every stage of life, whether we're embedded in the holy at times in our life, we're embedded in the brokenness, there is that hallelujah. So the Via Negativa

is named a lot in this poem. That's the whole point of the poem: that no matter how broken things become, there is the depths underneath it all. Cause for gratitude, cause for thanks, cause for celebration, cause for praise and for hallelujah, that the Via Positiva is deeper than all brokenness in life. And as he says,

Even though it all went wrong, I'll stand before the Lord of song, with nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah. The Lord of song. So then he talks early about how David played and it pleased the Lord. And so this whole idea that song is a prayer to divinity, and no matter what goes wrong, how many failures there are in life, nevertheless, when he dies, he will say nothing but nothing on his tongue, but hallelujah. That's his bottom line. That is the Yes to life. That is the mystic saying yes, in spite of everything.

And another one of the videos accompanying this, is about the "Anthem" song. The Anthem song is very political. It begins with *The birds are singing the break of day, but you can't live in the past*, he says. *For all the wars will be fought again. The holy dove will be caught again.* In other words, the dove of peace being caged, bought and sold, he says, and bought again. The dove is never free. Peace is so rare. Nevertheless, *Ring the bells that still can ring, forget your perfect offering.* In other words, recognizing imperfection in life and imperfection in ourselves. *There's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.*

And so there's bells that can sing hallelujah, sing the joy of life, but they're cracked. And there's a crack in the democracy bell too, the American democracy bell. But the light gets in through cracks, cracks that do not have the last word. So he's dealing here with the Via Transformativa, the lack of peace in the world, with the Via Negativa, the cracks in the bell. But he's also dealing with the Via Positiva, because that's what bells are about, about ringing out to the community as a whole, that there is an affirmation of life.

Again, that could be a transformative basis of *the lawless crowd, the killers in High Places say their prayers out loud.* That's pretty familiar, isn't it, the hypocrisy of those who are carrying on the killing. *But they've summoned up the Thunder Cloud, and they're going to hear from me.* So that's the Via Transformativa, taking on his responsibility as a citizen to speak out: *They're going to hear from me, ring the bells that still can ring. There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.*

So tremendous lessons there, of the Via Positiva, the Via Negativa and the Via Creativa and Transformativa: the bells, the singing, the ringing, the protesting, the saying No, that is grounded in a deep Yes. So much deep theology in the work of Leonard Cohen and many substantive artists. Thank you. We'll see you next week.