

Leonard Cohen Reflection by Edris Harrell August 20, 2017

I am by no means a Leonard Cohen expert; I really didn't even know much about him before he died. But since learning that he wrote and published poems and novels, I have enjoyed reading some of his poetry. His poems can be a fun read, with silly ones like:

"As soon as I understood

(even to a limited degree)

That this is G-d's world

I began to lose weight

Immediately

At this very moment

I am wearing my hockey uniform

From the Sixth Grade"

Cohen's poems were usually humble, often self-deprecating, and they used the minutiae of life to express deeper concepts such as love, culture, religion, and racism. He wrote many poems involving love and women that made me blush, and I won't be reading any of those for you! The poetry seems to be timeless, but that's probably because these ideas and issues are timeless. People are always, for example, evolving in their spirituality and questioning if there is a higher power and what that means in their lives. And people have always, and will probably always continue to discriminate based on skin color, race, religion, identity, or anything that makes an "other." But the more recent publicity of the police shootings of unarmed black men, issues around immigration, and the events in Charlottesville bring some of Cohen's poems into sharper focus. The following is a poem called "Tired."

"We're tired of being white and we're tired of being black, and we're not going to be white and we're not going to be black any longer. We're going to be voices now, disembodied voices in the blue sky, pleasant harmonies in the cavities of your distress. And we're going to stay this way until you straighten up, until your suffering makes you calm, and you can believe the word of G-d who has told you so many times, and in so many ways, to love one another, or at least not to torture and murder in the name of some stupid vomit-making human idea that makes G-d turn away from you, and darken the cosmos with inconceivable sorrow. We're tired of being black, and we're not going to be white and we're not going to be black any longer."

Cohen starts the poem off in a lovely, poetic way talking about pleasant harmonies by voices of unknown color. It reminds me of the civil rights movement of yesterday and today, how we talk about confronting hate with love. For example, Martin Luther King's quote "Hate cannot drive out hate: only **love** can do that." And now we have the hashtag #lovetrumpshate, or Michelle Obama's quote

of “When they go low we go high.” But then Cohen turns to a harsh scolding, like a parent who has lost their patience, and there is the anger that lies under the civil rights and Black Lives Matter movements. Because we need the anger to motivate us to act. If we’re not outraged we’ll just sit on our couches and do nothing. And if we do nothing the other side will win. Racism will win, hate will win. Cohen starts and ends with what sounds like a statement of giving up: “We’re not going to be white and we’re not going to be black any longer.” It’s giving up because it’s impossible to not have racial differences or different skin color. He wants a solution that will never exist. It’s the statement of someone who is tired. And, really, we should never want a reality of us all being the same. But I understand his fatigue. This next poem almost seems to be in response to that.

The sea so deep and blind
The sun, the wild regret
The club, the wheel, the mind
O love, aren’t you tired yet?

The blood, the soil, the faith
These words you can’t forget
Your vow, your holy place
O love, aren’t you tired yet?

A cross on every hill
A Star, a minaret
So many graves to fill
O love, aren’t you tired yet?

The sea so deep and blind
Where still the sun must set
And time itself unwind
O love, aren’t you tired yet?

Both poems repeat the word “tired,” and because they were published in his last book of poetry in 2006, I can’t help but wonder if Cohen was looking back on his lifetime and feeling tired that things had not changed enough. Yet, he titled the last poem “Faith.” So perhaps he still had some faith that love had not given up—that there did continue to be love in the world. No matter what has happened throughout the history of humankind, there have been expressions of love.

In his very unique way, Cohen did imagine himself changing the world, and I will end with this last poem called “The Great Event.”

“It’s going to happen very soon. The great event that will end the horror. That will end the sorrow. Next Tuesday, when the sun goes down, I will play the Moonlight Sonata backwards. This will reverse the effects of the world’s mad plunge into suffering for the last 200 million years. What a lovely night

that will be. What a sigh of relief, as the senile robins become bright red again, and the retired nightingales pick up their dusty tails, and assert the majesty of creation!”