

The Wise Fool

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There was a fascinating story on NPR this past week. It was about a boat that was spotted off the western coast of Canada. It was obviously a foreign vessel, so the Canadian Coast Guard approached it with caution. These are dangerous times after all. Following Al Qaeda's attack on the USS Cole in 2000, the military is particularly sensitive to potential vulnerabilities. So the Canadians pull up to this boat, that is looking rather old and rusty, and they hail it. "Anyone on board, eh?" Or something like that I am sure is what they said.

Well as they got closer they noticed a curious thing. That in fact no one was about this ship. It was derelict; roaming the high seas without a soul on board. A little investigation revealed that this was a Japanese fishing vessel. You see last year when the earthquake and subsequent tsunami hit the coast of Japan, a large amount of debris was carried out to sea. So much so, that scientists could actually watch this cloud of stuff float out into the ocean from their satellites in space. Of course a number of ships and boats that had been docked were either

destroyed instantly or sank shortly after being torn away by the waves. That is except for this one lone little fishing vessel.

It began its journey across the sea propelled by nothing more than the wind and the ocean currents. It just bobbed along like a cork in a river, taking whatever circuitous route across the ocean that Mother Nature planned for it. Until finally it made its way across the northern Pacific to Canada. This is Chuang Tzu's "Empty Boat" come to life!

In our reading today, Chuang Tzu uses this metaphor to describe what I have dubbed the "Wise Fool." The Fool is an archetype, that is a symbol or metaphor that runs through the myths, stories, and art of many different cultures. The psychologist Carl Jung would use these archetypes as clues to what was going on in the human psyche. Since Jung, his followers have identified and described a number of these archetypes. The Fool is one of them. The Sufi mystics in Islam, such as Rumi, would describe themselves as "fools for God." Paul writes to the Christian community in Corinth that "God's foolishness is greater than man's wisdom." The Tibetans noticed that some of their greatest teachers and gurus were also some of the biggest nuts you would ever want to meet. They called these particular teachers practitioners of "crazy wisdom." The Crazy Wisdom tradition is in Japanese Buddhism too, and was practiced by such iconoclasts as Ikkyu, Hakuin, and Shinran. These masters questioned what it meant to practice Buddhism. Shinran, the founder of the True Pure Land School, was the first monk in

Japan to eat meat, drink sake and get married. This set the precedent for Japanese Buddhism since. The Fool is more common in our secular art and literature. Shakespeare wrote: “The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool.” Even the Beatles, on their Magical Mystery Tour, talk about the Fool on the Hill; who is in fact wiser than the people around him.

I suppose if there was ever a time to consider the archetype of the Fool, today would be it. I enjoy April Fool’s Day. I have tried a couple of jokes on the staff in years past. One year the Executive Team had a meeting on April Fool’s Day, and when it was over I tried to convince Catherine, our DRE that in our meeting we had officially abolished the youth group. She is either too smart, or knows me too well, and didn’t believe me.

Probably the best, and perhaps the worst, April Fool’s joke I ever played was on my Mom. My Mom is a very trusting soul, which is very sweet and innocent, but it makes her an easy mark for April Fool’s Day. When I was in college I called home to check in, and I told my mother that I had gotten my girlfriend at the time pregnant. I know—a terrible thing to do. I even had a whole story that I had concocted. I strung her along for about twenty minutes before relieving her of her stress with the obligatory “April Fools!” Now I share this as a cautionary tale to all of you would be pranksters out there. My lesson to you is this: karma has a way of catching up to you. Because it was about ten years later, Sharon

and I had been married for a few years and were actually trying to get pregnant. When the glorious day arrived and Sharon told me that she was in fact pregnant, in that moment I turned about four shades paler than I normally am. Even though I was happy, I was also incredibly shocked and surprised. And in the next moment, as I slowly began to come to terms with the fact that I was in fact going to be a father, I was filled with tremendous regret for the joke I had played on my Mom years before. So be careful of what you do today!

Actually jokes like that are not really about the Fool, despite the name of today's holiday. That would be what Jung and others would call the Trickster. The Trickster archetype is more cunning and devious than the fool. The Trickster plays pranks on people mostly for his or her entertainment and occasionally for personal gain. The Trickster is acting out of the immediate desires of their Ego for pleasure at another's expense. The Fool acts out of a very different place. The Fool is grounded in the larger sense of Self that encompasses self and others. The Fool acts out of compassion. Chuang Tzu is defending the wise fool not the Trickster in his parable.

But in order to understand the Fool we must first understand the King. In Medieval times the king ruled his kingdom with nearly unlimited power. The Church was the only thing that stood in his way, and in some cases not even then. No one who liked living dared to disobey the king and they certainly didn't criticize him or make fun of

him to his face. To have done so would have been treason, and would have been the last free act you would have done.

That sort of king, that rules through fear and who expects his personal whims and flights of fancy to be obeyed without question, is the very definition of tyranny. In our Modern Reading this morning Bob Moore would call the tyrant the shadow of the true king. A real king serves the people more so than himself. But when all you have is people around you who tell you everything you want to hear, and reinforce to you your preconceived notions and opinions, you inevitably develop blind spots. No wonder the king begins to think of himself as omnipotent and, like Herod and Saul, they easily fell threatened by a new kid on the block. The result is widespread death and destruction.

The Fool is the exception to this. Since most people do not take him seriously, he is given a wide latitude in what he can say directly to the king's face. In the play King Lear, the Fool is the only one who can make fun of the King. As the play goes on, soon the Fool is Lear's only reliable companion; the only character not swept up in the craziness that resulted from the king's arrogance. This then is the Fool's true role: to point out the uncomfortable blind spots the king has so that he does not become an insensitive tyrant. So the Fool's job is not just to tease, to make fun, but to also get the king to think about things in a new light he had not considered before.

Probably the best example of the true Fool archetype in our culture would be Jon Stewart and the Daily Show. At no point does Jon Stewart ever pretend to be a serious journalist or news analyst, and I urge you not to take him as such. However, there is a seriousness behind his jokes about our politicians. By getting us to laugh at their folly and silliness, he gets some important points across. Granted sometimes he is just silly and laughing at him is cathartic. But at its best, the Daily Show gets you to laugh and think at the same time. That was exactly the role of the Fool—get the king to wake up to the blind spots in his power. This is a kind of enlightenment or mindfulness that the Fool encourages the King to pay attention to. Hence the Fool is also wise.

To put a check on the destructive power of the tyrant is a vitally needed function these days. Remember these archetypes are not just stories and symbols that we read about or hear songs about. They represent powerful energies in our own minds. For all of us there is a narrative running through our heads. It is a story that we tell ourselves over and over again often without even knowing it. We populate this story with characters we find in our real life and because we never truly know what another person thinks or feels, we make assumptions about other people all the time based on these internal stories of ours. So the Fool, the King, the Tyrant, these are not just in Shakespeare's head, or Paul McCartney's head, they are in our head too.

If you don't believe me, then consider the recent death of Trayvon Martin. Here we have a black man walking in a well-to-do white neighborhood. George Zimmerman, who was doing neighborhood watch, sees Trayvon Martin walking down the street with his hoodie up. Now those are just the descriptive facts. What happens next is based on a series of assumptions these two people have about each other. These assumptions we make about other people fit conveniently into the narratives we all have running through our minds. So Zimmerman sees a black man dressed like he is, and already, before either of them have done anything Trayvon Martin is a character inside Zimmerman's mind. Never mind the fact that Martin is simply walking to a friend's house who happens to live in that neighborhood. Reality didn't necessarily match Zimmerman's mental narrative. He just went with what he assumed was true. Now I don't know who started what or who said what or how it all came to be. However, if you have a gun and you consider yourself the powerful protector of the realm, and you go about shooting people, what are you? That sounds like the Tyrant to me. Herod's slaughter of the innocents isn't just a story we hear at Christmas time. It happens today. If we give it energy, and it goes unchecked and we don't have anything or anyone making us question our assumptions and looking at our blindspots—which is essentially the Fool's job—then terrible destruction can result. The Fool calls us to be mindful of

ourselves in ways that can be uncomfortable but also necessary. That is the fool made wise.

For Chuang Tzu, the Fool understands the interconnectedness of all things. They see how the Tao flows through the world and the Fool, or the seeming Fool, flows with it. If you think about it, that would be a very strange way to live compared to how most of us live. It is no wonder that the hermit in the cave, or the sage on the mountain, or the fool on the hill is viewed with distrust and suspicion. Remember at the beginning of Star Wars, Luke's uncle Owen describes Obi-wan Kenobi as "that crazy old hermit that lives out in the Dune Sea." Living simply and close to the earth is counter-cultural for us. Some might even see it as foolish. But from a different point of view, it is swimming with the Tao.

It is all about perspective isn't it? That was Chuang Tzu's point in describing the empty boat. If you were a member of the Canadian Coast Guard, and you saw a strange ship floating along, seemingly in no logical direction, what would you think? What would be the narrative you told yourself? Is this boat captained by terrorists who are intentionally being erratic, and therefore we should open fire? Or, would you do what the actual Canadians did, and sidle up to it only to find there is no one on board. As Chuang Tzu asks, who then can be angry with an empty boat?

But the empty boat is also a metaphor for us. Chuang Tzu is not saying that we should negate ourselves or deny parts of who we are. He only urges us to hold those stories in our head a bit more lightly than we often do. Pay attention to them, first of all, and then don't get caught up in them so much. Fame and achievement, two of the stories that are probably the most popular, are dreams we chase. Perhaps we catch them for a moment, but then the euphoria fades quickly and we are off to chase after more fame and more achievement. It is a process that has no conclusive ending and is ultimately dissatisfying. People who have a degree of fame and achievement may seem from outward appearances to have it all. They really have things put together don't they. Our culture places a premium on fame and achievement. If you don't chase after those two ever-elusive goals, which at best bring temporary contentment, then you are the fool. Really?

By urging us to empty our boat, Chuang Tzu asks that we be like that Japanese fishing vessel wandering wherever it will. It has no agenda, no place to be. So that every where it is, is perfect. He writes: "Who can free himself of achievement and fame then descend and be lost amid the masses of men? He will flow like Tao, unseen, he will go about like life itself with no name and no home. Simple is he, without distinction. To all appearances he is a fool. His steps leave no trace. He has no power. He achieves nothing, he has no reputation. Since he

judges no one, no one judges him. Such is the perfect man—his boat is empty.”

So this April Fool’s Day, I urge you not to be a Trickster so much as an honest to goodness Fool. Question your unspoken and uncomfortable assumptions. If you really are a fool, then you will be able to laugh at them. May we have the courage to live simply and to live well regardless of what others may think. And may we be wise and brave in speaking out against tyranny of all kinds; within and without. Amen Blessed Be.