On what it is to be a fool

Originally published as 'On what it is to be a fool' (*Sacred Web 10*, 2002)

> 'Ali ibn 'Abdan knew a madman who wandered about in the daytime and passed the night in prayer. "How long," he asked him, "hast thou been mad?"
> "Ever since I *knew*"[1]

What is it to be a fool? To not know what is real. It is that simple. In our present day and age we say it is to behave like a child when you are meant to act like an adult. To act as an adult is to know what is real. So it is said. The Persian poet Jalauddin Rumi tells the story of a Sheikh who rode about on a stick horse playing with the town children.[2] Surely this Sheikh was a fool. That a certain bystander recognized the Sheikh as the only person in the town with intelligence must be weighed against the fact that this bystander thought that the Sheikh was concealing his intelligence in the "madness of child's play." Are children mad? We will not say that. But they sometimes treat the imaginary as real. In a child we excuse this, saying that it is but ignorance. Yet in an adult there is no excuse. It is a sure sign of foolishness.

Why did the Sheikh, whom the bystander proclaimed the only intelligent man in the town, play like a child? The bystander suspects the Sheikh conceals his intelligence in this mad play. Obviously such an intelligent person has ulterior motives. There is a long history of such deception. Hamlet's "method in his madness" is maybe most famous but Hamlet himself learnt the trick from King David who feigned madness to escape the wrath of King Achish.

---

[1] Al-Yafi'I, *Rawhd al Rayahin*, Cairo, 1889, in Emile Dermenghem: *Vies des Saints musulmans*, Algiers: Baconnier, n.d., p.340; cited in W. N. Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2000, p.643.

[2] R. A. Nicholson, *The Mathnawi of Jalauddin Rumi*, London: Luzac and Company, 1925-1940 II, 2338-42, 2384-85, 2400-2430, 2436-38, 2442; M. G. Gupta, *Maulana Rum's Masnawi*, Agra: M G Publishers, 1995, II, 2577-83, 2644-73. The free verse rendering of this poetic text is taken from C. Barks with J. Moyne, *The Essential Rumi*, New York: HarperCollins, 1995, pp.44-46. I am indebted for certain Persian nuances to Lynn. C. Bauman's delightful essay, 'Initiatic Grace in the Masterwork of Jala ud-din Rumi', *Sacred Web* 6, December Issue, Vancouver, 2000.

When the Sheikh is questioned about his playing he answers: ‘The people here want to put me in charge. They want me to be Judge, Magistrate, and Interpreter of all the texts. The Knowing I have doesn’t want that. It wants to enjoy itself.’ So he feigns madness to avoid responsibility. He is not mad. We might be tempted to say that he is irresponsible, lazy even, but he is not mad. If anything he is deceptively clever. This child’s play is certainly a trick–if a somewhat laborious one–and if he didn’t have to fool the town’s people he could (and obviously would) go back to behaving like a reasonable adult. We might begrudge him his shirking his responsibilities; we might admire his cunning; but at least we can now make an all-important rational sense of this pseudo-madness.

If we think we have discovered the reason for the Sheikh’s playing then it is we who play a trick on ourselves. ‘The Knowing I have doesn’t want that. It wants to enjoy itself.’ He does not say that he feigns madness to avoid the responsibilities of the town, he simply says that the Knowing he has doesn’t want that life. What this Knowing does want is to enjoy itself. ‘I am a plantation of sugarcane,’ he says, ‘and at the same time I’m eating the sweetness. … Chew quietly your sweet sugarcane God-Love, and stay playfully childish.’ ‘In the Kali yuga’ says Sri Ramakrishna, ‘one does not hear the voice of God … except through the mouth of a child or a madman’. As Jesus teaches, ‘In truth I tell you, anyone who does not welcome the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.’ The Sheikh plays as a little child because he wants to, because he is as a little child. There is no deceit here.

Let us return to the townspeople, to the people who need there to be a reason in this play, to the rationalist, to our modern age. If the Sheikh plays with his stick horse and believes this to be real then surely he is a fool. Little does it matter that this stick, this “reed” or *ney*, as it is in Persian, is for Rumi, and equally for the Sheikh, an axial symbol of the “transporting influence of Divine inspiration”; that this is none other than *al-Ruh*, the Spirit, the intermediary between the human and the Divine. Never mind that this stick horse is, in the Persian text, a *faras* or “Pegasus,” a winged horse who, like the excellent Buraq, can gallop this axial path between earth and heaven. The townspeople merely see a fool on a pretend horse who thinks that it is real.

Meanwhile the Sheikh plays for joy in the knowledge that he is mounted safely upon the steed of the Spirit. He has relinquished the exhausting illusion of thinking he directs this horse and instead rides it where it will. For the Spirit has no master but "blows where it pleases."

The town's people nervously laugh at the Sheikh and anxiously continue in their desperate attempts to measure, to know and to control a world immeasurable by its very nature.

Who is the fool? Who sees where reality lies?

There are two types of fool. There is the person who is called a fool by their community because they turn away from what would be forced on them as reality. Admitting their own ignorance in the face of Divine Wisdom they try simply to remain focused on the "one thing needful." Noah was such a fool. Then there is the fool who claims to have risen above ignorance and childish obedience and who struts around in the surety of their own intelligence. Do they even see the rain clouds gathering?

Rumi tells another story of Jesus fleeing a fool.[3] An onlooker stops Jesus and asks what it is he flees. 'I am fleeing a fool." says Jesus, 'I am emancipating myself.' The onlooker is astonished, 'Are you not the same Messiah by whose grace the blind and the deaf are restored?' Jesus says that this is true. The onlooker then asks as to the secret of Jesus' healing powers that he can heal these ills but cannot cure this disease of foolishness. Jesus replies: 'The disease of foolishness is a divine curse; blindness is not from the wrath of God but is an ordeal.[4] Ordeal is an affliction that induces compassion; foolishness is that disease which invites wounds … the cure of the ill-fated one is not affected by mercy.'

[3] *Mathnawi*, (Nicholson), III, 2570-98; (Gupta), III, 2806-38; (Barks), p.204.
[4] *John* 9:1-4.

Worldly foolishness is ignorance of Divine Mercy. Thus it cannot be cured by mercy, for mercy must be accepted to save. This foolishness can only be cured by the cleansing hand of God's severity and justice. 'If I create the world only with the attribute of mercy,' says God, 'sins will multiply beyond all bounds; if I create it only with the attribute of justice, how can the world last? Behold, I will create it with both attributes; would that it might endure!'[5] In the divine judgment of the foolish lies God's greatest mercy, for herein humankind is saved from itself.

Such a foolishness that demands Divine Judgment is unique in any cycle of human existence, for it necessarily calls the end of that cycle down upon itself. At other times God's saving Mercy intercedes. According to the *Zohar* both Abraham and Moses pleaded with God to show mercy and thereby saved the world. Yet Noah 'just built the Ark and the whole world was destroyed'[6].

Rumi entreats us to flee the fools as Jesus did. 'The flight of Jesus' he says, 'was not out of fear (how can a living master be ever afraid?); he is ever in a state of tranquillity. His flight was for the instruction of others.' This idea of flight from foolishness brings us back to our first type of fool who has his or her archetype in Noah. It was Noah who worked obediently on the ark while the people of his generation rejected him and called him a "madman," as we are told by the Holy Qur'an, Surah 54 *al-Qamar* (The Moon). Noah built the ark in which to flee the foolishness of his generation. If only they might have heeded Noah's example instead of judging him according to their vanity. Noah offers a lesson like that of Jesus. It is a lonely lesson. Rejected and condemned by his fellow man, Noah cried out, saying: 'Help me, Lord, I am overcome!' And the rains came down.

The people of his generation thought Noah was a fool because he wasted his time in building the ark. But not believing in Noah's warning was no reason to despise

[5] *Gen. Rabba* 22.15.
[6] From D. C. Matt (tr.), *Zohar* The Book of Enlightenment, New York: Paulist Press, 1983, p.59. This story denies Noah a place amongst the "Righteous Heroes of Israel" condemning him for not pleading with God for the sake of the world. Yet Noah remains the "righteous man of his generation." This

him as they did. They might well have left Noah alone to his crazy construction. He hurt no one with his ark building. What then caused their resentment of Noah? The Holy Qur'an says that they were affronted that Noah, who was, after all, just a human being like them, should claim to some divine knowledge. Jesus was also "just" a man who suffered at the hands of a people living in denial of the truth he brought, which they already knew. If you simply disagree with something you can always just ignore it. Yet if it niggles you deep inside with the suspicion of some invariably lost truth, then you despise that thing, not for its difference, but for its very veracity. A person who embodies this lost truth disturbs society by causing it to become involuntarily aware of its own degraded state.

Antagonism towards things religious appears rampant in our modern age. Maybe nowhere do we see this more evident than in modern attitudes to the monastic tradition. As Frithjof Schuon has observed, it is ironic that when a person is simple or foolish enough to take religion seriously people do not scruple to tell them that they belong "in a monastery," as if they were a foreign body with no right to existence outside the walls of the appropriate institution. Yet if that person retreats to a monastery then these expounders of the modern ethos will chastise them for "running away from" the world, from "shirking their responsibilities." But, as Schuon remarks, the person who accuses this commits a double error: 'firstly, he loses sight of the fact that contemplative isolation has an intrinsic value that is independent of the existence of a surrounding "world"; secondly, he pretends to forget that there are escapes that are perfectly honourable and that, if it is neither absurd or shameful to do one's best to run away from an avalanche, it is no more so to run away from the temptations or even simply the distractions of the world, or from our own ego in so far as it is rooted in this vicious circle; and let us not forget that in disencumbering ourselves of the world we disencumber the world of our own sufferings.'[7]

Thomas Merton, monk, author and hermit, long contemplated the nature of solitude. In particular and of necessity he contemplated solitude in this, his and our, age of instant and constant contact. He wrote of Philoxenos, who, in his ninth *memra*

---

paradox alone is enough to allow us to consider the Zohar–enigmatic at the best of times–in a way that seemingly inverts the meaning of the text.

[7] F. Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, London: Perennial Books, 1965, p.120.

(on poverty) to dwellers in solitude, said that there is no explanation and no justification for the solitary life, since it is without a law. 'To be contemplative' says Merton, 'is therefore to be an outlaw. As was Christ. As was Paul.'[8]

The place of the fool is traditionally beyond law. In this the fool is free to provide the balance to the constraints of the law bound domain. In a certain sense this is the vocation of the fool. Shakespeare's King Lear requires the freedom of his fool just as much as he requires the laws of conduct that constrain everyone else in his court. Moreover the same is true visa versa: the prudent and judicious, as to say the "norm," are required just as much as the fool. The balance must always be weighed heavily in favour of the "norm," for they take themselves as such by virtue of their majority. Thus it is always the minority that are the "outsiders," the "outlaws," the few who operate according to a different and, by virtue of a majority vote, "false" reality. The fool is always the minority.

None of this is to say anything of Reality or the human norm *per se*. The fool as a vocation is an aspect of human society. A human society is comprised of both its exoteric and esoteric dimensions. Like the King's court, both dimensions are required for a healthy society. Is the minority view necessarily mistaken? The wisdom of Lear's fool dispels that illusion. But is the fool always to be taken as expressing the esoteric vision of the Sheikh with his stick horse? It is said of the Sufis that they cultivate the esoteric path (*haqîqah*) to counter the solidification of exoteric Islam (*shariyah*). We might ask ourselves, were the esoteric to become the way of the majority then would not the Sufis preach the strict laws of the exoteric domain to maintain a balance?

The fool teaches by virtue of breaking the bounds of the rational. There is no need to construct something "new" to fill the gap that this rupture leaves. Any such attempt can only end in replacing one illusion with another. The fool doesn't offer answers. The fool offers the void. Looking on this void the rational mind sees only the

[8] T. Merton, 'Rain and the Rhinoceros' from *Thomas Merton*: *Spiritual Master*, New York: Paulist Press, 1992, p.392.

terrifying turmoil of a dark and confused chaos. Within the void, the fool delights in the childish play of the creative possibilities.

The fool is like a human koan. From the outside the koan is necessarily absurd. From within it verifies an experience that transcends all rational and discursive meaning. So it is with the fool. The world of the fool can never be explained, it may only be shared. So the Sheikh rides his stick horse with children who, still as yet unclouded by the illusion of their own individuality, see a world of playful possibilities of which they are but one blowing in the wind.

To be a fool is not to know what is real. The fool who is like a human koan, who is like the Sheikh on the stick horse, this fool does not "know" anything. They have what the Zen Master, Seung Sahn, calls a "don't-know mind": 'A don't-know mind is a before-thinking mind. Before thinking is clear like space. Clear like space is clear like a mirror.'[9] When the rational townspeople look into the clear mirror of the fool they see themselves reflected therein. They each see someone isolated by an illusory individuality, trapped in the ludicrousness of a life that demands absurdity in the name of "originality," someone who replaces Reality for illusions of their own construction. And it is this, their reflection, which they judge to be a fool.

The Sheikh continues to play with the town's child. And they call him a fool, not realizing that they are referring to themselves reflected in the clear mirror of this person who doesn't "know" anything, but simply is.

[9] Seung Sahn, *Only Don't Know: The Teaching Letters of Zen Master Seung Sahn*, Rhode Island: Primary Point Press, 1982.