

Out of Africa - Sing your Song



In the early 1980's, I worked with a man called Sandy D'Oliviera. He was involved in introducing the Laubach system of literacy to underprivileged people in South Africa and I was involved in grass roots community development with rural Black South Africans for whom there was an 80% illiteracy rate. It was in the context of my job that I met with him as a resource for the people with whom I was working. He was then a man in his seventies. He had a large balding dome of a head that had once sported sandy colored hair – hence the name – a large roman nose, a twinkling smile and quiet sense of humor. He related to the poor and disenfranchised differently to other South Africans. He was lacking the usual paternalistic, condescending, do-gooder attitude of most so-called humanitarians offering aid. The people loved and revered him and he tackled the task of literacy with an unusual intensity and passion. I asked him about his great love for the work he was doing. He told me this story:

“Well, I haven't much time left. I spent most of my life doing nothing constructive at all. Until ten years ago I was a down and out drunk – a complete alcoholic. I had lost everything. My wife had left me years ago. My children had given up hope and would have nothing to do with me. I could no longer hold down a job. I had lost all my money and was living in a cockroach-infested flophouse in downtown Durban. I had enough money left to my name to buy one last bottle of whiskey. I decided that is what I would do – I would buy a bottle of whiskey and when I was drunk enough, I would blow my brains out. I lay down with my revolver in one hand and the bottle of whisky in the other, determined to end this miserable existence once and for all. Fortunately I passed out before I could follow through. I woke up in the morning thinking that I was a worthless failure of a human being – I couldn't even succeed in killing myself. I had the D.T.'s so bad, I could hardly keep my hand still enough to shoot myself. I drank down the last dregs of whiskey just to stop the shaking. Then I dragged myself up and staggered to the window. The room stank; I had a pounding headache, was nauseous and had peed myself. I threw open the window and the sound of rush hour city traffic and vendors yelling, the smell of gasoline and pollution filled the room.”

He paused, lost in memory. Then his voice softened and he went on,

“It was spring and the jacaranda trees lining the avenue were in full bloom dropping their blossoms and forming pools of violet shadow on the sidewalk. As I stood there, wondering how I could face another day, there was a sudden lull in the noise of the traffic, as sometimes happens. I suppose it was a few seconds, or so. In that quiet moment, a miraculous thing happened.”

He paused again to look at me sideways, watching for my response, knowing he had a captive audience and went on, “I heard a bird singing its heart out at the top of a tree.” His eyes moistened with emotion. “It must have just been a moment or two and then the noise of the traffic resumed – but I could still hear the bird singing – it was as if my ear was attuned to the sound of the song despite all the other sounds – that is the miracle,” he gazed off for a moment lost in the wonder of his inner discovery and then went on,

“I never had another drink. I have been sober ever since. I have a lot of lost time to make up for.”

My eyes had filled with tears too. It was a dramatic and moving story: a redemptive story. At the time I thought I had understood what he told me. I thought he meant that he suddenly saw the beauty of the world, heard the loveliness in the song of a bird and decided it was worth living after all. And this is certainly true.

But the story was so much more profound than I realized. I could only understand it years later after I had lived a lot more life myself and was able to recognize that he had heard the call of his own true Self. He had realized how all his attention had been grabbed and imprisoned by the noisy, needy, clamoring and the harsh loud criticisms of internal shame and fear. Inside his head there was nothing but the incessant noise of ceaseless, obsessive thinking – rushing backwards and forwards, and going round and round in circles..

The clear melody of his own winged soul had never stopped singing, it just could not be heard above the din of his mind. But he reached rock bottom, as they say. And in that moment of complete hopelessness and surrender, there was a pause in his thinking. In the blessed silence he heard the music of his own being. And after that no matter how much noise there was in his mind he could still hear the inner music. He switched allegiance and followed the song of his heart, instead of the noise of his ego. For the first time he was in harmony with himself. He was a dead man, resurrected to new life.

In his last years Sandy d’Oliviera brought hope and new life to all he touched – he opened worlds of knowledge to those who never believed they could aspire to an education. Although he has been dead many years, now, he lives – forever.

Lyndall Johnson
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Song of the Soul

In the depth of my soul there is
A wordless song – a song that lives
In the seed of my heart.
It refuses to melt with ink on
Parchment; it engulfs my affection
In a transparent cloak and flows,

The deeds of my hands heed its
Presence as a lake must reflect
The glittering stars; my tears
Reveal it, as bright drops of dew
Reveal the secret of a withering rose.

It is a song composed by contemplation,
And published by silence,
And shunned by clamor,
And folded by truth,
And repeated by dreams,
And understood by love,
And hidden by awakening,
And sung by the sun.

It is the song of love;
What Cain or Esau could sing it?

It is more fragrant than jasmine;
What voice could enslave it?

It is heartbound, as a virgins' secret;
What string could quiver it?

Who dares unite the roar of the sea
And the singing of the nightingale?
Who dares compare the shrieking tempest
To the sigh of an infant?
Who dares speak aloud the words
Intended for the heart to speak?
What human dares sing in voice
The song of God?

Kahlil Gibran