

“Still looking for a job,” she replied, wearily.

The Headmaster, always one for fatuous platitudes, offered her the benefit of his oft-delivered but rarely solicited advice. “Follow your heart, girl.”

Where was her heart? she wondered. In Tesco? Certainly not. With Bob? Equally certainly not. But the thought of Bob rekindled the image of those enticing empty canvases and delicious tubes of paint, the memory of how beautiful it felt to bring them together, to watch the colours flow.

“D’you reckon I could get into college on an art course?” she asked suddenly.

“I reckon you can do anything you want to do,” declared the Headmaster, seizing the opportunity to deliver more of his favourite words of wisdom. “Decisiveness, that’s the word. Decisiveness and perspicacity. Perspicacity and consequentiality. Not forgetting zeal and panache, eh, girl? Zeal and panache: those are the words.”

She turned away from Tesco and started walking briskly in the direction of the college. Decisiveness was the word that had taken root in her mind. She liked the emphatic sound of it, the four staccato syllables, like firmly planted footsteps marching into the future.

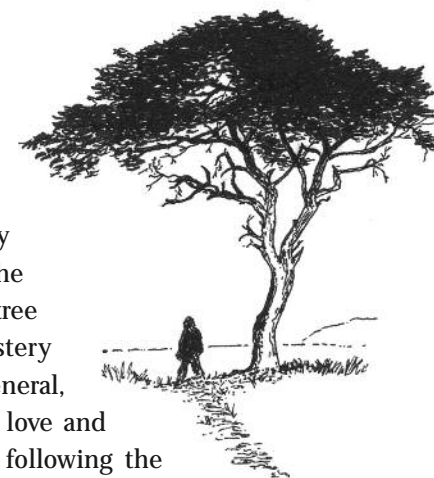
Words, she thought, are like the colours on a painter’s palette: beautiful in themselves, perhaps, but, when put together, so much less than the finished picture.

ZEN AND THE COLOUR OF ORANGES

A story of a tree

Roshi Kashumo, one-time abbot - or roshi - of the Zen monastery at Kanazawa, delighted in the cultivation of a single orange tree that grew in the monastery courtyard. Although not, in general, a gardening man, he lavished love and attention upon this one tree, following the principles he had learned in his youth from a bonsai master: carefully picking out the growing shoots, rigorously pruning the upper boughs and curling wire around the stout lower branches to direct their growth. Over the years, the tree took on the gnarled and sculptured appearance of a true bonsai, yet it grew to a height of twelve feet and was regarded by many to be the most beautiful orange tree they had ever seen. Kashumo’s meticulous pruning resulted in a profusion of blossom and a crop of oranges that would have proudly adorned a tree of twice the size. Each orange, slightly smaller than average, was perfect in both colour and shape, fitting neatly into the cupped palm of the Roshi’s smaller than average hand.

It was said that the tree regularly bore exactly 365 fruit each year, allowing Kashumo to enjoy one for his breakfast every morning. Although a pious and self-disciplined man, the Roshi - small of stature and gentle of speech - relished the pleasures of the senses as well as any man, and no sensory experience pleased him more than the taste of cool, fresh orange juice to start his day.



The monks of the community, of course, would never touch Kashumo's oranges but contented themselves with the less pampered fruit that grew in the monastery gardens. Kashumo personally picked his own exemplary crop and placed the luscious, shining orbs in a wicker basket beside his mat in the zendo where, even in grey twilight, they glowed with the orange light of the sun that had nourished them. Very occasionally, he would offer one to a guest, thereby denying himself his full annual quota of breakfasts. To be a recipient of such a gift was a singular honour.

Once, according to legend, the Emperor of Japan visited the monastery and, knowing the tale of the oranges, anticipated receiving the choicest specimen from the Roshi's wicker basket. But Kashumo, who regarded all men as equal and was in awe of nobody, declined to make the gesture. Later, he noticed the Emperor's servant boy gazing longingly at the fruits as they shone in the candlelight and, with a kindly smile, he handed the boy one, to the astonishment of all present. The Emperor said nothing. The entire company of monks, courtiers and guards watched in silence as the boy carefully peeled his orange, slurped noisily at the juice and chomped at the flesh. Not wishing to discard any part of the Roshi's gift, he scraped off the pith with his teeth and placed the outer skin into the soles of his sandals as extra cushioning.

The Emperor could contain himself no longer. It was not the custom, in those days, for anyone, even an Emperor, to question the words or deeds of a Zen Roshi, but nor was it the custom for the Emperor to be anything less than the focus of attention and the prime receiver of favours. Not one for hiding his feelings behind tact, the Emperor said, as respectfully as he could, "Why do you dishonour me by so honouring my servant boy?"

The courtiers nodded their heads. A good question indeed.

"An act of kindness dishonours no one," replied the Roshi, with a smile. "You expected a gift and feel aggrieved that you did not receive one. This boy, I could see, longed for one of my oranges but expected nothing, of course. Longing without expectation! You must concede that even an Emperor is no match for such power. How could I resist?"

The Emperor, for all his imperial arrogance, was educated enough to know that the quality of wisdom is second only to the quality of kindness, and here were both displayed in a single action. He bit his lower lip and, with an evident absence of sincerity, returned the Roshi's smile.

That night the servant boy was taken away from the Emperor's entourage by the monks and shown to a privileged bedchamber overlooking the courtyard. During the night the Emperor's bodyguard burst in to the boy's room, their swords raised, intent upon slaughter - whether acting on the Emperor's orders or inspired by their own jealousy is not known - but the monks, ever alert, had whisked the boy away and secreted him in a cave in the garden.

When the Emperor left, the next day - after a breakfast with the Roshi that was devoid of oranges and low on conviviality - the boy was offered for adoption to a local Samurai family. There he was trained in the art of swordsmanship and, years later, led a successful rebellion against the Emperor.

"Such is the power of happenstance: a single orange may change the course of a nation's history," said Kashumo, an old man by that time, but still capable of uttering a pithy epigram for every occasion.

Naturally enough, the monks of Kanazawa came to regard Kashumo's orange tree as a sacred object and they would bow reverently whenever they passed it while crossing the courtyard about their daily business. When Kashumo heard of this practice he rebuked the entire community.

"Why do you revere this particular tree?" he demanded. "Has God neglected to touch all other trees with his presence? If my orange tree is sacred, then so too are all orange trees. And if all orange trees are sacred, so too are lemons and limes, cherries and almonds, elms and firs."

"Then why do you devote such care and attention to that one tree?" asked one of the monks.

"Because it is the tree I see each day through the window of my bedchamber, my first vision of the outside world. If you see a fir tree

through your window, or a cherry tree, or a lump of rock, or a pile of dirt, then direct your love towards that. When awareness alights on any object, then that object proclaims the wonder of the Godhead.”

Kashumo, as head of a Rinzaï Zen monastery, would set koans upon which his monks would meditate in their quests for enlightenment. A koan is an unanswerable question that pushes the thinking mind to and, hopefully, beyond its limit. “Who am I?” is the most fundamental of all koans, the ultimate enigma of human thought, while “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” is the best known in the West (although it is doubtful whether this koan was ever used by the Japanese Zen masters).

Kashumo achieved a certain fame for his choice of either absurdly simple or fiendishly convoluted koans with which to bamboozle his most intellectually arrogant pupils. Often he would pick an orange from his wicker basket, hold it up before a novice monk and propose a koan such as, “Is the fruit named after the colour orange or the colour after the fruit?” or “Why is an orange orange?” or “The orangeness of an orange is its colour. What is the manness of a man?” or, strangest of all and an aphorism that came to stand for the highest ideals of the Zen aspirant, “When an orange rots on the kitchen windowsill, a crane flies off to the south. How can this be? What is the secret that connects all beings?”

And it is said that many a monk, sweating for days or months or years over such a koan, would suddenly experience the opening of his mind’s eye and rush to the Rōshi with his answer.

And if the Rōshi was satisfied with the answer he would smile, pick an orange from his wicker basket, toss it to the monk and say, quite calmly, “Good. You have it. Now enjoy it.”

The orange tree, planted as a pip by Kashumo when still a young man, grew old with the master. Its limbs became twisted, its skin wrinkled and furrowed, its exuberance subdued, its fecundity tempered. And yet it was destined to survive its benevolent patron by many centuries.

Some fifty years after Kashumo’s death, towards the end of the Seventeenth Century, the renowned poet Basho visited Kanazawa during one of his contemplative walks across Japan. Kashumo’s orange tree still stood in the courtyard, cared for with devotion - although somewhat less empathy - by subsequent Rōshis of the monastery. It was springtime and the branches were covered in blossom, so Basho was unable to indulge his dream of plucking a fruit, peeling its wonderfully orange skin and sucking at its flesh. Nevertheless, he commemorated the occasion by sitting in meditation beneath the tree and composing a suitable haiku:

Kashumo’s tree blooms.

We sit beneath its branches

To await the fruit.

Years after the days of Kashumo and Basho, in the late Nineteenth Century, the ancient orange tree was toppled by a small earthquake. Its roots remained embedded in the soil, however, and, even from its supine position, it sent forth its flowers each spring and annually produced a modest crop of oranges.

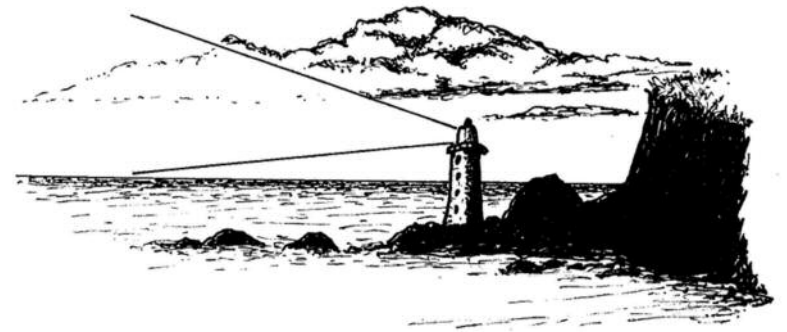
The Englishman Christmas Humphreys, who did so much to popularise Zen Buddhism in the West, once visited the monastery and came upon the tree. It lay on the ground of the courtyard, its boughs bizarrely twisted and tortured by age, but still a few healthy young shoots sprung from it, still it retained its legendary beauty and still a few of its fruits reached delicious ripeness. Mr Humphreys, a well-respected scholar of Japanese cultural traditions, pleaded for and was granted a taste of one of the latter generation of oranges from Kashumo’s tree.

“The essence of the sun was contained therein,” he later declared, “and so too was the essence of Zen.” With his characteristic penchant for hyperbole, Humphreys went on, “I saw that orange as a symbol of the very nature of Zen: a hard, smooth, impermeable, beautiful and perfectly shaped outer skin which, once pierced, yielded a juice that was both sweet and acid in equal measure.”

Kashumo, with characteristic scorn for overblown pomposity, would have laughed. He was a simple man who simply loved to eat an orange for his breakfast.

And the orange tree itself, the true hero of my story, would have given the words of the English scholar not a single thought, for, being a tree, it had neither capacity for nor need of thinking. While Kashumo and Basho and Christmas Humphreys came and went, it grew, as trees do: it absorbed sunlight, water and carbon dioxide: it blossomed, produced its orange fruits and silently basked in its own Being. Such is the way of trees.

POOTER



My father was a lighthouse keeper: a strange, littoral profession, between the jagged ship-crunching rocks and the roaring vastness of the ocean. I often used to imagine him silently patrolling the balcony of his lonely pinnacle in the sea, peering into the blackness for signs of vessels in distress. His was a noble and romantic calling, I liked to think, lighting the mighty lamp and keeping watch through the long, dark nights of winter: a life in which success was judged by the complete absence of incident.

Perhaps I was mistaken. Another possibility was that my lighthouse keeping father was a myth created and perpetuated by my mother to explain her husband's removal from our family home. But it was a myth which my siblings and I were happy to accept and to augment with our own imaginings. Was all his furniture rounded, I wondered, to fit against the walls of his tall, cylindrical, red-and-white striped home? Did he sleep in a curved bed? And did he have a toilet in his lighthouse? Perhaps he had a hole in the wall – quite high up above the crashing waves, of course – and he went directly into the sea.

One day, when I was ten and my father showed no signs of ever migrating from his lighthouse, my mother presented us with a small cardboard shoebox.

“The legacy of your father,” she said, simply.

We opened the box excitedly, expecting exotic treasures washed up on the rocks from shipwrecked galleons. But it was full of shells. My