

Remembering Robert Bly

Lewis Hyde

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Robert Bly was living on a farm in western Minnesota when his first book, *Silence in the Snowy Fields*, came out in 1962. In the fall of that same year I myself arrived in Minnesota. I had grown up on the East Coast, but my parents were both from Minneapolis and so, when it came time to go to college, I landed at the University of Minnesota. One evening when I was still a senior in high school I took out the university catalog so as to daydream about my future as a college boy. The campus map was a bit of a surprise. In the middle sat a large building labeled Cow Barn. Nearby were others: Sheep Barn, Pig Barn, Cereal Rust Lab, Weed Research... Down at the bottom right was a tiny building: Liberal Arts. I hadn't realized how far west I was about to travel.

It was a great relief, of course, when my grandfather picked me up at the train depot and took me to the Minneapolis campus, not to what we used to call the Cow Campus over in St. Paul. The main campus was huge: I think there were 30,000 students at the time, a large number to be sure, but fruitful to me because out of all those thousands I found a score of literary soulmates, including Jim Moore, Patricia Hampl, and Garrison Keillor.

Robert I didn't meet until November of 1965, when we were both on a bus going to an antiwar march in Washington, D.C. I had no idea he was a writer, however, until a few months later, when Garrison invited him to give a reading on campus. Robert was in his mid-thirties then; he was full of energy, full of opinions, highly knowledgeable about modern poetry, and editing *The Sixties*, a wild little magazine where poetry and translations got mixed with parodies, potshots at the government, and a mock literary award, the Order of the Blue Toad.

It soon developed that some of us would drive out to Madison, Minnesota—a hundred and fifty miles west—to try to figure out what this fellow was all about. The first time Jim Moore and I made that trip, we stopped on the way and bought a pork roast, my mother having taught me that good guests always bring a house gift. This was a raw roast, of course, not a prepared meal, but it was gratefully received nonetheless. Lots of young poets showed up in Madison in those days, but not many brought protein with them.

At the time of that visit, Robert had just moved an old one-room schoolhouse onto the farm to use as his study. Initially, however, it was going to serve as a honeymoon cottage for the poet James Wright and his new wife. Jim and I were put to work helping to fix it up for them. Our first job was to dig the outhouse pit. Such were the entry requirements for those wishing to enter the Republic of Letters in the 1960s.

On a later trip to Madison I interviewed Robert for *The Lamp in the Spine*, a little magazine edited by Moore and Hampl. (Their title came from Virginia Woolf: “One cannot think well, love well, sleep well if one has not dined well. The lamp in the spine does not light on beef and prunes.”) Looking back at the interview, I see that I had big questions on my mind: “Do you believe in God?” “Are you afraid of death?” In his answers, Robert kept declining to engage with my abstractions, his habit always being to think in images. In response to one question about spiritual life, he had this to say:

There's a skin or hide between ourselves and our inner being. And in the West that skin is very thick. Inside us there's a sea and that sea is your inner life, your spiritual life, and your sexual impulses—everything you've gotten from the memory stores of evolution. Then there's the outside world made of buildings and automobiles. And these two worlds can't rub against each other. It's too painful. Therefore you develop a hide exactly like a cow develops a hide. You don't want her guts to rub against the barn.

Thus did my studies begin on a Cow Campus after all, with Farmer Bly as one of my tutors. He had many lessons to offer.

A primary one had to do with solitude, something that has since played an important role in my own life. Robert has often told the story of his own initiation: “I went to New York and I lived in a room by myself.... I had about two and a half years of solitude which troubled me and which drove me out of my mind; but nevertheless, in the course of that I understood something.”

There is a narrative, a plot as it were, to the experience of solitude. Certain things happen as the time unfolds. “Psychic energy can be drained by talking,” Robert once remarked. “My experience is that when, by means of solitude, the psychic energy is prevented from dispersing, then, after five or six days the psychic energy takes rhythmic forms . . .” That’s actually quite deep into solitude: if you’ve made it to day five or six, you are doing very well. The first few days can be hard, in part because going off by yourself is an implied insult to the community or

to your loved ones and they may threaten to withdraw their affection if you leave, or at least you imagine that they might.

Clearly, there are inhibiting forces standing in the way of solitude. Fear is one of them, as are periods of gloom or doubt. And if these are what first meet you when you retreat, you had better be prepared to wait them out. You had best enclose your withdrawal with some ritual boundaries to keep habitual distractions at bay. Don't pick up the mail; disconnect the router; tell your sweetheart not to visit. Time and enclosure: these are what the artist must have. Talent is essential, but the yield may be small without time and enclosure.

The final piece of the narrative of solitude appears when you reenter the world. If you've really made contact with something fresh, or really become unselfconscious, then you return with a different quality of attention. Time spent away from the things the culture takes for granted offers a chance to notice the incongruity between what is and what might be. In solitude lies a promise of fresh speech and fresh action for, oddly, being alone is connected to being with other people. "It was first in solitude that I really felt an affection for the human community," Robert has said. After all, if you can't be at ease with yourself, how can you be at ease with others?

Another lesson that many of us learned in Robert Bly's barn has to do with the soul work of connecting the inner and outer worlds. I'm going to build my description of this work around two of Robert's sentences, the first of which comes from his great antiwar poem published in 1970, "The Teeth-Mother Naked at Last." The Vietnamese, he wrote, "are dying because gold deposits have been found among the Shoshoni Indians." The second sentence is not printed anywhere I know of; it's inscribed in my memory. At one of the many public events around the war protests, I remember Robert saying, "We are killing men with black hair because the Minnesota Historical Society owns the scalp of Little Crow." Nobody in my family ever spoke sentences like these; very few people do, actually, and it's worth reflecting on how they operate.

The first thing to say is that they contain history, and some history about Little Crow is therefore in order. Little Crow was a Dakota Sioux, one of the leaders of the Sioux Rebellion of 1862. A decade before that date, the Sioux had entered into a treaty with the U.S. government in which they agreed to settle along the Minnesota River in exchange for land, annuities, and certain other goods. The U.S. Senate reneged on this deal, whereupon the Sioux tried to drive

European settlers out of Minnesota. This act of rebellion failed, and a year later a farmer shot Little Crow while he was foraging for berries near Hutchinson, Minnesota. The farmer took the body into town, where the townspeople mutilated it, dragging it through the streets with firecrackers stuck in the ears and dogs picking at the head. The farmer scalped him, there being a bounty on the Sioux in that time and a double bounty for Little Crow. When I was in college, both the scalp and the skull were owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

The sentence about “the scalp of Little Crow” contains history, then, but it is swift history. The sentence jumps between two moments in time and in doing so reveals a connection to the Surrealists, who famously juxtaposed things that no one would normally think of putting together. Such juxtapositions are the stuff of dreams, of course, the Surrealists being very much interested in the dream work of the early psychoanalysts.

Knowledge in each of these cases—in dreams, in Surrealism, and in Robert’s practice—comes to us in images. Regarding Little Crow and history, you could of course say something like “There is a strong correlation between nineteenth-century racial attitudes among Europe immigrant populations and the difficulty of winning the loyalty of our allies in Southeast Asia.” But that’s a scalped sentence. It has no living animal body in it, and therefore no feeling life, and therefore little chance of giving birth to ethical or spiritual consciousness, let alone to action. Images in Robert's works are not simply a matter of craft; they arise from a sense of how human consciousness functions in its fullness, how it engages with the world. In an early essay about working with images, he reminds us that we had a period of “imagism” in this country, one associated with Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. Robert differentiates that movement from what he and others were trying to do in the Sixties by saying that the earlier “imagism” was largely “picturism”:

An image and a picture differ in that the image, being the natural speech of the imagination, cannot be drawn from or inserted back into the real world. It is an animal native to the imagination. Like Bonnefoy's “interior sea lighted by turning eagles,” it cannot be seen in real life. A picture, on the other hand, is drawn from the objective “real” world. “Petals on a wet black bough” can actually be seen.

In one sense the lines I've quoted contain the kind of pictures that can be found in real life; you could actually go see Little Crow's scalp if you wanted to. But you cannot see the whole

of what that line contains because the full image leaps between two centuries. In this surreal moment the Indian Wars have bumped into napalmed Vietnamese farmers.

The imagistic density of the “Teeth-Mother” manages to combine spiritual questions (can you feel compassion for distant strangers?), psychological claims (unexamined inner life produces violence in the outer world), and political demands (the war must be stopped). It is political poetry in the simple sense of speech that cannot be aligned with the speech coming from the government or the television. “Political concerns and inward concerns have always been regarded in our tradition as opposites, even incompatibles,” Robert has said. The promise of what might be called “active solitude” is that it can dissolve that supposed opposition: “the political poem comes out of the deepest privacy.” Where that isn’t the case, where inner and outer remain unrelated, then the task of the poet is to thin out the “skin or hide” that separates the two, to replace the protective skin of indifference and inattention with a better, livelier membrane. The name of that membrane is poetry.

In this case it is a poetry of both faith and action. Notice that both quotations I’ve offered are declarative sentences, each declaring its given perception to be true. They are assertions of faith, therefore—of the faith that the world is being read coherently, that meaning has been drawn out of the noise and nonsense on offer. And after faith comes action for, if these perceptions are clear and true, then they call for a response.

There are many stories about action from the days of the war in Vietnam. To speak of only one of these, in the spring of 1968 Robert received the National Book Award for *The Light Around the Body*. The date matters because a few months earlier the government had begun to arrest public figures who were counseling draft resistance. The Reverend William Sloane Coffin, Dr. Benjamin Spock, and three other men had been indicted for conspiracy and put on trial. Robert gave his NBA acceptance speech on March 6, 1968, and at the end of it he gave his award check to Mike Kempton of The Resistance, saying: “I hereby counsel you...and other young men...to defy the draft authorities--and not to destroy [your] spiritual lives by participating in this war.” That sentence is what language theorists call “a speech act.” It didn’t just say something, it did something: it broke the law.

Robert may not have broken other laws in those days, but he was always ready for a good fight. In his book *Equals*, the British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips touches on questions of public combat, setting out to imagine what equality might really mean and why we often resist it. In the

course of his argument, Phillips makes a nice distinction between two kinds of fighting: *antagonism* and *agonism*. With antagonism, we try to crush our opponents and silence them; agonism, on the other hand, welcomes conflict, entertains it, enjoys it even. An *agon* in ancient Greek drama was a verbal contest between two characters on the stage, each of whom appealed to the audience, neither having any necessary claim to the truth. Greek democracy borrowed from drama in this case, for democracy flourishes whenever antagonism can be converted into agonism, the contending of equals.

Robert's literary criticism and his political interventions have always been democratic in the sense of welcoming agonistic exchanges. He once said that most American criticism was out to either destroy enemies or praise friends. He suggested and practiced a third form: "Those who are interested in the same sort of poetry [should] attack each other sharply, and still have respect and affection for each other." Whether they were directed toward friends or not, there were always fighting words in Robert's little magazine. As if to announce what was to come, the first issue contained these lines from William Blake: "O young men of the New Age! Set your face against the ignorant hirelings! For we have hirelings in the Camp, the Court, and the University who would, if they could, forever depress mental and prolong corporeal war."

Depress mental and prolong corporeal war: Robert's antiwar poetry does the opposite. It engages in mental combat so as to depress the corporeal. There are men and women my age who are alive today because of that era's antiwar activism. We cannot know who they are, but they are among us. The Sixties are often maligned, imagined mostly in terms of sex and drugs, but to describe them as such covers up the more significant story line. The antiwar movement actually did something; so did the civil rights movement; so did the wave of feminism that began at the end of the Sixties. Each of these changed our world immeasurably. Sonia Sotomayor wears a black robe because Richard Nixon arrested Dr. Spock.

I began with a story about visiting Robert in Madison, Minnesota; I'll end with a related story told to me by a friend, a professor of Hinduism and Indian religions. According to my friend, a famous Sanskrit scholar who lived in Berkeley, California, was working at home one day when there came a knock on the door. When he answered, a man was standing there who said he wanted to see him. The scholar said that he was very busy; perhaps they could make an appointment. The visitor explained that he had come all the way from India, that he was an

admirer of the man's work, and that he just wanted to see him for fifteen minutes or so. The scholar relented and admitted his visitor, asking him what specifically he wanted. "Oh, nothing," the man said, "I really just wanted to see you." He sat there for fifteen minutes watching as the scholar went back to work. Then he left.

In Hindu culture, *darshan* means the beholding of a sacred object or a revered person. When we were undergraduates at the University of Minnesota, it was important to us that we see some poets. There were several in the state, and we used to go look at them. All young people do this, I think. Robert did it when he was young—he went to see William Carlos Williams, for example. He also laid eyes on authors and traditions long past—on Rilke, Juan Ramón Jiménez, Jakob Böhme and many others. In remembering Robert Bly, we must necessarily remember as well the artistic and spiritual traditions he worked to preserve and enhance, acts of generosity from a generous man.

For years I've kept a little pamphlet Robert gave me, translations of poems by the haiku poet Issa. Here are three of them:

Now listen, you watermelons –
if any thieves come –
turn into frogs!

This line of black ants –
Maybe it goes all the way
back to that white cloud?

The old dog bends his head listening . . .
I guess the singing
of the earthworms gets to him.

On the first page of this little pamphlet we read: "This booklet is a gift, and is not to be sold."

I sometimes wonder if that sentence wasn't a seed for my own work on gift-exchange and art. I recently read a remark by Bob Dylan about the first time he listened to Woody Guthrie: hearing Guthrie's songs, Dylan says, left him "feeling more like myself than ever before." That's a very strange remark if you think about it. A young man listens to an older man's art and it makes him feel like himself.

As for me, I spent many days with Robert Bly during which I felt quite like myself. It's a bit mysterious, really. Mysterious to be born into a human body. Mysterious to have the gift of consciousness. Mysterious to mingle one mind with another. Wonderful to find friends and companions whose spirits enter into our own, enlarging us and letting us know we are not alone. How fine for many of us to have found, when we were young, such a spacious barn out in the snowy fields of a Minnesota farm.

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