

Tunings

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Leading From Our Gifts

Michael Jones

*For as long as the gift is used the people will live...
when it is forgotten they will perish*

Black Elk

To lead from our gifts begins with being willing to receive our gift. This may be a part of the difficulty with gifts. To receive the gift means that in some way we are not in control of it. That is, we become servants to the gift rather than masters of it. To be a servant of the gift is to be sensitive to following its leadings and the gift may lead us into situations and circumstances that are different from what we would imagine or prefer.

This idea about the gift comes alive for us in The *Juggler at Heaven's Gate* a poem by Raymond Carver, one of America's most loved poets and short story writers. In this instance we find a man in the saloon, hardened and made cynical by life, captivated by the scene of a little man on a dusty street throwing three sticks in the air. Sometimes following the leadings of our own gifts may bring us to bring us to just such a street in just such a town.

*Behind the dirty table where Kristofferson is having
breakfast, there's a window that looks onto a nineteenth-
century Street in Sweetwater, Wyoming. A juggler
is at work out there, wearing a top hat and a frock coat,
a little reed of a fellow keeping three sticks*

in the air. Think about this for a minute.

This juggler. This amazing act of the mind and hands.

A man who juggles for a living.

Everyone in his time has known a star,

or a gunfighter. Somebody, anyway, who pushes somebody

around. But a juggler! Blue smoke hangs inside

this awful café, and over that dirty table where two

grownup men talk about a woman's future. And something,

something about the Cattlemen's Association.

But the eye keeps going back to that juggler.

That tiny spectacle. At this minute, Ella's plight

or the fate of the emigrants

is not nearly so important as this juggler's exploits.

How'd he get into the act, anyway? What's his story?

That's the story I want to know. Anybody

can wear a gun and swagger around. Or fall in love

with somebody who loves somebody else. But to juggle

for God's sake! To give your life to that.

To go with that. Juggling.

With this poem, Carver transforms a dusty street in Sweetwater, Wyoming to the stage upon which each of us works out our own destiny. By asking "what's his story?" he shows how, in a single moment, a small, gratuitous and deeply personal gesture can be

crafted into something of significance and beauty that changes us forever. The paradox is that in a land of gunfighters and mavericks, this juggler is the real outlaw in that, by standing in the street in his own gift and integrity, no matter how foolish his actions may at first appear, he is the one living outside the rules.

I have felt 'befriended' by this poem because by receiving my gift of music I have also experienced being surrounded by 'gunslingers, mavericks and stars' How do you explain to sceptical schoolmates and colleagues this inner urge to create which asks for such patience and strong faith that we commit many years of thankless practice to it with no guarantees that anything will come as a result. I also felt that I was living outside the rules.

And yet sometimes the moment comes when, like this little reed of a man throwing three sticks in the air, our gift changes everything. Just as the juggler's presence makes the entire scene more vivid and alive; bringing up the grime on the saloon windows, the swirling dust on the street, the menace of the gunfighters, the murmur of quiet conversation at the tables – being willing to accept our gift and follow its leadings also brings our world alive. It causes us to become both more responsible *and* more vulnerable at the same time.

Carver holds a deep compassion for this creative life that he knows so well. "Go with the work that lasts" he says. So his poetry is unstintingly generous – his potent images asking much less from us than they give to us. And what he consistently offers is the invitation to be fully ourselves, particularly when the outcome is unclear and the risks are great.

References

Artful Leadership, Michael Jones. Pianoscapes, 2006

The Juggler at Heaven's Gate from Raymond Carver, *All of Us The Collected Poems*

(New York Vintage Books, 1966) copyright Tess Gallager, 1996