Without Love?

By Christopher Forrest McDowell

It was a sweltering day, when every slice of shade is occupied by bodies and flies. But I gave my desire for relief to the women and children and elderly and frail. I stood in the sun, rivelets of sweat cascading down my chest and back. My shirt and pants were soaked. A large crowd had gathered in the courtyard of this teacher's estate. I had quite by accident found myself caught up in the movement of the mass of humanity that spilled into this austere setting from off the main street. But even though the heat and tightly packed bodies should have made the experience uncomfortable, the overall ambience and tranquility of the ashram had a tolerating and cooling effect to the mind. So I stood there near the front with eyes fixed on him.

When he finally spoke, he said only this: "Who among you today is without love?"

I shall never forget this moment. He looked directly at me. And I was transfixed on his penetrating gaze. I could not deny the opening inside my heart that he was prying. Not forcing, but assisting, for I had so long tried to enter this realm myself but with repeated failure. He must have known this, he must have. And certainly he knew every lover I deceived, every flower I glanced away from too quickly, every beggar I despised for approaching me and not someone else, every dream I sold cheaply for a too brief pleasure of the body. He knew all this and more I am sure.

So, it was fitting that he directed the question to me. And because he did so, the crowd disappeared like water vapor in the midday sun. I no longer felt the pulsating flesh around me, the breathing and sighing. He held me alone in the palm of his hand, holding my soul up to the sky, offering me to the heat of my pumping blood.

And I stepped forward to answer the question. "Me."

The sage bowed before me then reached out to my chest and tapped my heart. "How can this be so?" he began. "You are a student of love, I know, can see it in your eyes, smell it in your body's musk, and I know how it feels in your groin. But without love? . . . perhaps you have not listened to her voice, soothing your brow in your sleep, whispering her devotion at your lips, touching your hand as you stroke the river's water over your body. She lives inside you, filling your breast with hers, the fullness of her lips enflame your own, her pelvis lies just beneath your groin. She is your inner skin, Shakti,

goddess, beloved, the morning light before the sunrise, the dew beneath your feet. And you believe you are without love? What color is her hair in the dawn of your day? What is the texture of her skin as you place your clothes on your body? Have you not desired to kiss her eyebrows and pick her a flower? You are not without, lacking. Turn around and gaze into this crowd. She lies hidden in every face you see, but hers is the one with light in her eyes, the one desiring you more than any of the others. Who is worthy more than he and she who believes they are without love? They are the children of their dreams, innocent and open. They are sage and saga, the wise man and wise woman, experienced and yielding. Look, look! She breathes for your heart, and you must trust."

The sage then pronamed and turned around, walking away from me as if he merely completed a routine ritual at a favorite altar. I stood there, but it did not feel like standing. I felt as if I was hovering above the ground, my mind catching a passing breeze, lifted up over the ashram walls and gently thrown into the crowds along the thoroughfare. I saw a woman far ahead, she appeared to be floating herself above the throng, searching down into the fleshy masses as if for something lost. My heart leapt. She seemed familiar, but I could not place her. Our eyes met for a moment. And then I felt pulled back into my body, into the courtyard, admidst these brothers and sisters, beneath the sweltering sun.

They began to move slowly out of the walled abode, back into the main thoroughfare. I felt anxious to break free, but knew I must surrender my will to these people. This is what their life and day was about, moving slowly from experience to experience, thinking nothing of what was or will be. No one recognized me, the one who shared the spotlight only ten minutes ago with the object of their inquiry. I was a small historical moment in the passing of their lives, unimportant in the larger picture. But still, I could not help feeling that I had so much love to give now and no one cared. I moved with the crowd, surrendering more to its flow, like a river current taking me of its own will. For a moment I imagined perhaps this was how it should be, this crowd as it were, delivering me to your feet, like a sailor capsized from his boat, thrown onto the shores of your harbor, safe.

I know that one day, when I see you, I will recognize you.

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