



THE IMPORTANCE OF LYING FALLOW

by Julia Noakes

BREAK OUT OF YOUR SHELL that your wings may grow/Let yourself fly. These are the words of the Sufi poet Jalāl ad-Dīn Rumi, from his poem Ramadan, a timely poem for Eid, as across the city, Muslim men and women break their fast.

Poetry, if we dare, allows us to find the rhythms inside ourselves.

The psychoanalyst, Masud Khan wrote a delightful essay, entitled Lying Fallow on the importance of something more than, something otherwise, than being active and busy searching for answers to the human conundrums we face in our lives. Lying fallow is not to be confused with laziness - but to say the game is up - the unimaginative path we are treading needs rejuvenation, our quick solution perhaps a sign that something is wrong, not all as it seems. 'Fallow', in the Oxford English Dictionary, means to be "left for a period without being sown", nothing going on, no ploughing of ourselves, "in order to restore its fertility", and perhaps profoundly important to our hectic, consumerist ways, "to avoid surplus." To lay fallow is to subvert excess.

Psychoanalysis has always cautioned us to be mindful, to rest a while, cautioning us that our desire for something maybe an escape for something that matters more. This is not to say one must think-through the leaps that may lead us to evolve, like a carefully organized balance sheet of credits and debits, but to sit quietly, leaning if you like, against the wooden signpost at the crossroads, allowing the rays of the sun or even the rain to touch us. If we're on the run, then perhaps what we are running from is deeply important. "It aches in my chest though," says a troubled client, "It really hurts," as he holds back his attempt to leap for his Blackberry. In Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, I think he is saying, as well as many other things, that that there is no greater loss, than the loss of pain.

When we escape, what we run to may temporarily assuage the deadness or turbulence (pain?) inside of us, only for us to find we are no happier than when we started out, or perhaps weighed down with even more troubles. Gandhi not only led the freedom struggle of India's independence, but encouraged a nation to value the ancient Indian wisdom of contemplation and emptying the mind of litter. He allowed himself to go fallow, trusting, having faith, that answers would emerge along with the repetitive rhythms of spinning. Each Friday, he spent the day in silence, as part of his uncluttering, with a small notepad on a string around his neck, for any urgent communication.

Like all extraordinary leaders he evoked in the collective, a call to higher consciousness, not merely through his actions, but with his tenderness with words. He was exceptionally talented in his use of language, (both well-read and a writer of course), our poet of non-violence, who seemed to know our deepest human longings is for better words, richer sentences that we pray, carry us along a more loving path. It would seem every nation knows, even as they load their rifle-cartridges, his exquisite words, "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind." Such a simply collection of words, sitting like



friends, next door to one another, create a very powerful image, but only is it through the patience of lying fallow, in whatever unique way for each one of us that might be, do his words perhaps awaken something beyond our commonplace retributive ways.

Rudyard Kipling was of course born in Bombay. Remember his poem, "IF you can keep your head when all about you/Are losing theirs and blaming it on you..." Poetry asks us to stop in our tracks. For me, to read and write poetry since childhood, is to navigate the contours of myself, to experience the world more deeply and strengthen a voice inside that whispers quietly and longs to speak of that which may be unpopular or against the tribal mindset. Poetry calls us to go fallow. W.B. Yeats took up residence in my heart when I was about eleven years old: Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths/Enwrought with golden and silver light/The blue and the dim and the dark cloths/Of night and light and the half light/ I would spread the cloths under your feet. Then later, feeling perhaps a little weary in the corporate machinery, I found Pablo Neruda: It so happens I'm tired of being a man/It so happens I enter clothes shops and theatres/ withered, impenetrable like a swan made of felt/ sailing the water of ashes and origins.

Poetry, often asks us to think of others, to go beyond our selfish conundrums, to take a moment for: all those motherless children, weeping/In the shells of broken homes, are no more (by the poet James O'Sullivan). Here in the cement jungle called Mumbai, the poet Narayan Surve in Mumbai, asks us to take a moment to see the city through his eyes. He seems to ponder about the lives of those who remain colonised in this metropolis, long after the British have left:

My father withered away toiling
So will I, and will my little ones?
Perhaps, they too face such sad nights
Wrapped in coils of darkness.
My heart wells up.
Seeks an outlet;
For it was my father
Who sculpted your epic in stone.

Words are our intoxication; they have the power to create war, to deepen love and to tear us apart. They live-on inside us, past the date of delivery, as memories of ourselves, shuddering in their wake or stroking our bodies, or stabbing in sleep, or healing those squatter ghosts. The Yorkshire Poet Ted Hughes, published the Birthday Letters, a collection of his life with wife Sylvia Plath, Written after her death, many poems were his attempt to commune with his wife, such as his poem, The Visit:

Nor did I know I was being auditioned
For the male lead in your drama ...
As if a puppet were being tried on its strings,
Or a dead frog's legs touched by electrodes.

Poetry often commands us to step back from the drama of how we are living, for instance in one Hughes magnificent crow poems: Old Crow/Flying your black bag of jewels/From chaos to chaos/Probe hard for those maggoty deaths/Which poison our lives. To lay fallow, to allow something inside for a while, it is an act of empowerment; a refusal, a resistance against the order of the



commonplace, the bombardment by the ugliness of the same old, same old words. To sit and wait for new words on the inside to emerge, to write original stories, is to allow that hidden part of us to speak, our hidden self to emerge. One of Rabindranath Tagore's poems, written about his rather ambiguous relationship with Kadambari, his sister-in-law, is delicious to savor as the Bombay monsoon rains pelt down, blocking the cement high-rises from the view outside my window:

I could speak to her on a day like this,
on a day when it rains as heavily.
You can open your heart on a day like this –
when you hear the clouds as the rain pours down
in gloom unbroken by light.
Those words won't be heard by anyone else;
there's not a soul around.
Just us, face to face, in each other's sorrow
sorrowing, as water streams without interruption;
it's as if there's no one else in the world.

Without new patterns of words, there are no novel steps to take us on more enchanting journeys. It starts with taking that vulnerable little child inside us, in the embrace of our own care; that tiny creature that just wants tribal approval and is worn out by the same journeys, that leaves the same grooves and the monotonous depth of compulsive living. To lay fallow is to dare silence. Who hasn't felt polluted by the people we encounter, their demands, especially in an urban space like Mumbai, the cement jungle infiltrating us, the tiresome language of go-getting and greed and grasping? And then a moment of poetic beauty on the streets of the city, as a chuckling grubby street baby, is embraced by her smiling mother, who is no taller than a healthy ten year old.

The poet has to wait in silence, in spaciousness. She knows the struggle inside is part of this. Not only does poetry open the door to lying fallow, but it gets in between more than one closed mind. When two minds close, there is usually an argument over words, each claiming a better story or a deadly indifference. The poet O'Sullivan writes: Incapacitated by a resentment we could not name/ We walked the streets as actors in separate frames/And all the while, the festival of eyeless beggars/Taking turns to play Homer to our epic-starved lives. Besieged by anger, deafness, intolerance, a longing to run away, we turn away from what it might mean to turn towards and seek-out new words. My dearest friend Chandra, who has a profound tenderness in her heart, loves this poem, as I do, by Sheenagh Pugh *The Bereavement of the Lion-Keeper*:

Who stayed, long after his pay stopped,
in the zoo with no visitors,
just keepers and captives, moth-eaten,
growing old together.

Who begged for meat in the market-place
as times grew hungrier,
and cut it up small to feed him,



since his teeth were gone.

Who could stroke his head, who knew
how it felt to plunge fingers
into rough glowing fur, who has heard
the deepest purr in the world.

Who curled close to him, wrapped in his warmth,
his pungent scent as the bombs fell,
who has seen him asleep so often,
but never like this.

Who knew that elderly lions
were not immortal, that it was bound
to happen, that he died peacefully,
in the course of nature,

but who knows no way to let go
of love, to walk out in sunlight,
to be an old man in a city
without a lion.

As I allow this poem to seep into my being, I wonder why we leave so much that matters to us, until it is too late. When the people we love have gone. When we have deferred all the kindnesses we once sincerely intended – queued up now along with the other reminiscences of things past - days we now know may never come again, through choices we weren't aware we had ever even made. Like those youthful dreams for ourselves that struggle to break through, and we occasionally fall down and sometimes we get right back up, if we allow the field of ourselves to go fallow. We fail, perhaps, like the Mint, of Seamus Heaney's poetic garden simply "through our disregard."

W.H. Auden, the poet once said that poetry makes nothing happen. I wonder if he meant that only we, ourselves, can make something happen. Or that nothing appears to happen, because everything is happening. Perhaps a few moments of lying fallow, will work it all out.