

Muskrat Love

Rich Homa

We have just celebrated the holiday we call Thanksgiving, where as usual we light-skinned folk as a nation conspicuously failed to offer thanks to those I believe most deserve them: the First Americans who made the survival of the original European colonists possible, and who have immeasurably enriched the lives of all of us who followed them to this wondrous land.

Since, as far as I know, there are no First Americans here to thank, I am going to do what I hope is the next best thing: I am going to try to take one of their myths, the beautiful story of Wazhushk, into my own heart, to keep it warm and comfortable, to listen as carefully as I can to what it has to say to me.

But isn't that rather patronizing? Surely, there is a better way of paying tribute than pretending - and it *has* to be pretending - to admire a mere myth - a silly old story.

A dozen or so years ago, I was at the bat mitzvah ceremony for the daughter of some old friends of mine. In the course of her D'var Torah, or homily, on the Book of Jonah, she asked the question, "Is this a true story, or is it just a myth?"

Rachel, like many others of us in our culture, had accepted without question the doctrine originating in the Enlightenment and extending into our postmodern era that myths are fanciful tales told by ignorant savages or malevolent phalocrats to entertain themselves around the campfire, to keep children and women and the lower orders in line, and to indulge in frivolous speculation about matters that we more enlightened folk settle properly, by scrupulous application of the scientific method - which, of course, we invented. In this view, since no one could possibly survive being swallowed and then disgorged by a whale - since in fact there are no whales in the Mediterranean capable of swallowing humans - the story of Jonah is obviously a myth, perhaps told in order to make people so afraid of the great bully in the sky that they become slavishly obedient to his priests.

But there is another way of looking at the relationship of truth and myth. There's another story, not from the Judeo-Christian but the Greco-Roman side of our cultural heritage: dreams, it was said, come to us from the castle of Morpheus. It is a castle with two gates, one for each kind of dream: the false, misleading dreams issue from the

gate of ivory; the dreams that speak truth to us, from the gate of horn.

Now, think of a myth as a collective, waking dream, cast into story form so that it can be passed on to our children, literal and figurative: those who are physically born into our cultural family, and those who seek and secure adoption into it.

In this view, the answer to Rachel's question was, oddly, simply, "Yes". Yes, it is a true story, and yes, it is a myth. It was the story of an actual soul's journey in search of meaning and something to believe in, told - as stories like that must be told if they are to capture anything of the emotional turbulence of such a soul on such a journey - in the dreamlike imagery that characterizes myth.

Of course, not all myths are, like that of Jonah, true. Some, like that of an Aryan master race, clearly came through the gate of ivory. But the sweep of what Doris Lessing calls "we-feeling" in it leads me to believe that the story of Wazhushk came through the gate of horn. In any case, seeing myths in this way, as stories that can be deeply true though they are not - or even *because* they are not - factual has a number of benefits.

First, we open ourselves to the possibility of experiencing the world in a richer and more satisfying way than is possible when we limit ourselves to the sterile literalism and obsession with surface appearances that the theologian Marcus Borg calls 'fact fundamentalism'. The irrepressibility of religious belief, exemplified by its survival behind the late, unlamented Iron Curtain, where it kept bursting forth like a dandelion emerging through the asphalt in a parking lot, leads me to believe that there is a deep and essential need in human beings to have their socks knocked off from time to time. It seems that the soul requires awe and wonder as the body requires food and water. But it is very difficult to assuage that need on a diet of YouTube, reality television, and breathless accounts of Britney's latest problems at her current rehab facility. At least occasionally, we need to take Paul's advice to the Philippians:

Whatsoever things are true,
Whatsoever things are honest,
Whatsoever things are just,
Whatsoever things are pure,
Whatsoever things are lovely,
Whatsoever things are of good report,

If there be any virtue,
And if there be any praise,
Think on these things.

Second, this attitude toward myth lets us reclaim our cultural heritage and the beautiful old stories of our wisdom tradition from those who would distort and manipulate them, and to do justice to those anonymous souls who gave us them. The fact that many myths have been misused as instruments of oppression or to sow confusion must not blind us to the fact that those who originated them were heroes who not only had the toughness and resilience to survive grappling with the Great Mystery, but the imaginations and vocabularies to communicate to generations following something of the overwhelming feelings they had experienced and the truths they had been entrusted with as rewards for their courage and tenacity.

From this perspective we can look at, say, the Garden of Eden story not as something that we could watch on the Discovery Channel if only the serpent had thought to strap a videocam onto his head, and a demonstration of the danger of letting women make their own decisions, but as a metaphor for the emergence of human consciousness. The "fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" is, then, the awareness that being human means being able to choose something other than what the sympathetic nervous system, that dark well of instinct and passion that we inherit from our reptilian ancestors, urges us to do. And the eating of it brought not death itself, but the uniquely human awareness of death, its inevitability and utter arbitrariness, that goads us to such terrible and magnificent efforts to extend and to burnish what time we may have before its arrival. And, finally, Eve was not the original sinner, who brought evil into the world by her disobedience, but the visionary pioneer who birthed our full humanity and delivered us from the life of mere beasts.

Finally, this understanding of the heroic qualities that go into the creation of true myths encourages us to listen more respectfully to the stories and storytellers of other cultures - especially if we realize that by doing so we can understand better what lies at the core of our humanity, as opposed to that which is contingent on particular circumstances of temporal and physical environment.

With this perspective and these objectives in mind, let us now proceed to the myth of Wazhushk. I do not pretend to offer the 'correct' interpretation of this myth - in fact, I don't believe any such interpretation exists. What I am going to do is talk about some of the

truths *I* see embedded in the story, and invite you to search for others on your own.

The story of Wazhushk opens on the survivors of a great flood, sent by the Great Mystery, Gitche Manito, to heal the wounds of the Great Mother, who is suffering the effects of our cruel denial of our kinship with her and with her children, our brothers and sisters. (If this sounds familiar, it is because this is one of the myths that, in the words of Sallustius, the philosopher of the 4th century of the Common Era, is "something that never happened but is always true"). The waters of that flood are of such an excruciating purity that only one with extraordinary qualities of spirit can pass through it and be granted her redemptive and restorative touch - and even such a one cannot physically survive the ordeal.

What are those qualities? On the face of it, the story of Wazhushk is that of an act of astonishing courage. But we can look at that act, or any act of courage, as an act of love as well. After all, the word 'courage' comes from the Latin word for 'heart', which is what we festoon candy and cards and the like with on St. Valentine's Day. So it is that we can substitute 'courage' for 'love' without changing the basic meaning in, for example, the saying attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of John, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Now, from one perspective, there is an even greater love than the one Jesus talks about. Let me explain what I mean by quoting from this description of how my dad "celebrated" one New Year's Eve over sixty years ago:

For gallantry in action on 31 December 1944 in the vicinity of Silberscheidt, Germany. Private First Class Homa volunteered to lead a night reconnaissance patrol on a mission to discover enemy positions. The patrol was ambushed. In order to distract attention from the other members of the patrol, Private First Class Homa ran forward, fell to the ground and commenced firing, accounting for several enemy. After his comrades reached safety, he withdrew across open terrain. His courage and devotion to duty are in accordance with the highest military traditions.

There are a couple of things you need to know here to provide context.

First, the action described in that citation was part of a battle that is

now taught at the Army War College as an object lesson in all the things an army commander can do wrong. Under the circumstances, my dad's loyalty was not to the fool who headed the First Army or even to the nation, which after all was ultimately responsible for putting that general in charge of it, but to the Intelligence and Reconnaissance platoon that he was in. *That* was my father's little 'band of brothers', the 'friends' that he risked - but fortunately for me did not have to give - his life to rescue from the machine gun nest in northwest Germany that had pinned them down on that miserable night during the worst winter in the memory of those who lived there.

Second, at that time and place in the war most German men of prime fighting age were dead or, generally worse, in some Soviet Gulag. So I have this picture in my mind of someone in his mid-fifties with his finger on the trigger of the machine gun, sweating as many bullets as were issuing from the barrel, and a kid maybe sixteen years old feeding him ammunition. Then and there, the Reich could muster very little more in the way of troops in defense of the Fatherland. Those were among the 'several enemy' my father may have 'accounted for'. Just maybe, that explains why he never cared to talk about how he got his Silver Star, and why he never showed any pride in it.

In a sense, then, *killing* for one's friends shows a greater love than *dying* for them: it is the gift that goes on taking - draining your soul - for the rest of your life. Had that boy grown up, who knows what revolutionary scientific discoveries he might have made, what sublime works of art he might have created? Who knows what wisdom that older man, at a time of life when aging often transitions into what Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi splendidly calls sage-ing, might have enlightened the world with? Which is the greater sacrifice: one's life, or one's peace of mind for a lifetime?

But that is looking at the greatness of love in terms of what we might think of as its depth. The love Wazhushk displays, on the other hand, is unquestionably greater in the dimension that the healing and redemptive qualities of love are a function of, and that is its breadth. *His* circle of friends is not a handful of soldiers trapped in a snow-covered evergreen hell, but all of life; he saves them from destruction at no one's expense. His love is broader even than that of Paul when he tells the Galatians, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus", since it encompasses not only all of humankind but all living beings - and, moreover, sees 'life' in a more

comprehensive sense than do Western biologists.

And there is another kind of love in the story of Wazhushk. My father said once, the only time he talked to me of that night in the Hurtgen Forest, something I have heard from other people labeled 'heroes' one way or another: "I just did what I had to do." To some extent, he meant that he did what some drill instructor had programmed him to do, but the fact that his patrol was behind enemy lines meant that doing nothing would not mean the cavalry coming to the rescue but a murderous barrage of 88 shells or mortar rounds in very short order. So he did the only thing that offered any chance of saving his own skin, which as it turned out not only worked but saved the skins of his comrades. Wazhushk was in the same kind of predicament, where doing nothing was not a real option. And if he had not only succeeded in his mission but survived, he would have enjoyed the praises of all the others on the great log, a quite satisfactory substitute for a medal. So both Wazhushk and my father were motivated to some extent by the love that dares not speak its name in certain circles today: self-love.

Institutional Christianity tends to emphasize how evil and debased we are, so unworthy of love that it takes literally superhuman effort to bestow it on us, and even then only after we have been made minimally presentable by a bath in divine blood. But think about the implications of the exchange between Jesus and his heckler in the Gospel of Luke:

And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?

He said unto him, What is written in the law? how readest thou?

And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.

And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live.

But what can the love of creatures as depraved as so many Christian authorities make us out to be for our equally vile neighbors possibly count for? And what use would a being that transcends all need have for it?

Once again, the original message of Jesus, of liberation and self-confident autonomy, has been hijacked by people who saw in early Christianity an opportunity, by claiming the exclusive ability and authority to interpret that message, to preserve and extend their own political power.

When we think of integrity, we usually think of word and deed being one. But that is really only the outward expression of the virtue. The underlying integrity - which means nothing more or less than 'wholeness' - is the oneness of the self, a oneness that includes both that which we share with other animals, and that which is unique to us as human beings - or, at least, share only with mythic muskrats.

It is a strange and terrible irony that those who most insist on the "just below the angels" uniqueness of human beings, their separate creation from all other animals, are precisely those most likely to see us only in terms of the animal part of our nature. To be 'human', to them, means to be indifferent to anything but the gratification - and *immediate* gratification - of our physical needs. If you believe that, then it follows very naturally that the full expression of our humanity would be a nightmare and that only superhuman power (with, of course, selected human agents) can keep it in check.

In fact, our massive forebrains and the astonishing kind of consciousness that emerges from them give rise to distinctly human needs, needs that have nothing to do with our bodies, needs that are literally *metaphysical*: the thirst for justice, the hunger for beauty, the lust for oneness with the whole.

And since love is all about satisfying needs in order to nurture growth, that means that self-love, for a human being, *cannot* be about just physical needs. Not that it can exclude them, either: we need our bodies to bring our visions of justice, beauty, oneness, and the like into being. But it means that self-love requires serving the whole self, which means attending to *all* our needs, of body and soul alike.

More: as self-love completes the unification of an individual's personality, its integrative force - acting in service of that need for oneness - overflows and dissolves the boundaries between self and others, so that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female". And as we participate in this process, our individual talents merge with others like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle, or threads in a tapestry, or voices in a choir, preserving their separate qualities but adding up to something bigger than the

sum of its parts.

And that means that for that whole to emerge, all of us have to cherish and protect from destruction all the parts that go into it: all the species, all the cultures, all the individual human beings, with their unique capabilities and powers, whether those are shooting an M1, diving deeper than anyone else, or - and perhaps this was the helldiver's true calling - goading others into making efforts they didn't realize they were capable of: because one never knows when an insignificant, ignored, and despised creature - the son of a carpenter from an all-but-forgotten town in a backwater province of a mighty empire, or a thick-furred, musky-smelling, web-footed rodent floating on a giant log - may be precisely the instrument marked by Gitche Manito, the Great Mystery, to revive a horribly wounded world.