

Meeting Kahlil Gibran

By Shraddha Shetty



"Kahlil Gibran - Autoritratto con musa (darsi).jpg" - Wikimedia Commons, 4 Apr 2020.

When I was very young, I came across a book called *The Prophet*, by poet, painter, thinker, but perhaps above all, a philosopher, Kahlil Gibran. I clearly remember a sense of mystery; the existence of truths about myself, beyond the known. I did not know what I was searching for, but it awakened in me a desperate thirst to know myself. I had set off on a journey, and Kahlil Gibran's works have been a shining light ever since. Gibran was born to humble beginnings in 19th century Lebanon, in a world torn by war. So vast and diverse are the themes of his investigation of Life, that any attempt to zoom in and summarize specific ideas would be unjust and limited. In this reflective article, therefore, I trace through extracts of Kahlil Gibran's works, to touch upon just a few ideas that fellow philosophers might stumble upon in the voyage of life.

Only once have I been made mute. It was when a man asked me, "Who are you?"

(From: *Sand and Foam*)

I was clueless, and therefore the best I could do was search. In retrospect, I think I was also seeking some contact with pure beauty in my day-to-day reality; something that would touch my heart, and give me some clues about myself, just as I had experienced in Gibran's poems. I realized that any thought or deed, which I recognized as truth, touched the sentiment of beauty in my heart. And so, I used truth and beauty as signposts, in my search for my own identity.

Where shall you seek beauty, and how shall you find her unless she herself be your way and your guide?

(From: *The Prophet, On Beauty*)

The pursuit of beauty, naturally led me to search for goodness and justice in a world which seemed to be devoid of values. Deep in my heart I recognized the need for, agreed with, and craved for a world based on truth. Meanwhile I was labouring to keep my head above the water of disharmony, where partial convenient truths, halted the search for deeper truth. I saw that constant competition and the rat-race made many feel lonely and incomplete. My efforts seemed to find a float in Philosophy, for Philosophy does not halt at opinions. It is ready to replace a personal opinion with another's, if truth is discovered in it.

Say not, 'I have found the truth,' but rather, 'I have found a truth.'

(From: *The Prophet, On Self Knowledge*)

This journey made me realize that there exist within me two selves: one that wants to be guided by truth and pulls me out of personal comforts, and another that doesn't want to make the effort. The misery of this discovery found expression in Gibran's words.

***Have mercy on me, my Soul.
You have shown me Beauty, but then
Concealed her. You and Beauty live
In the light; Ignorance and I are
Bound together in the dark. Will
Ever the light invade darkness?***

***You are rich in wisdom, but this
Body is poor in understanding
You do not compromise
And he does not obey.
This, my Soul, is extreme suffering.***

(From: *A Tear and A Smile*)

Gibran writes a lot about nature. But for him, nature is not limited to the mountains and rivers, plants and animals; he inquires about the eternal principles of life through each of these, which also apply to human nature.

If we could learn through his writing, maybe we could glimpse an accomplished art of unbiased observation, so essential to live philosophy. One thing is very clear - he is really good at putting his feet into the shoes of different people, different beings. Whether to see the world from the point of view of a mountain, the sea, from the viewpoint of a greedy person, or that of an altruist, he attempts

to imagine the entirety of life without excluding the various possible perspectives.

To visualize the world through a multiplicity of perspectives, could seem like a complicated puzzle from the viewpoint of each piece, because each piece sees itself as separate from the other pieces, and can only see from its own subjective point of view, missing the bigger truth. Gibran expresses agony at the lack of truth that results from sticking to this limited view.



Said a blade of grass to an autumn leaf, "You make such a noise falling! You scatter all my winter dreams."

Said the leaf indignant, "Low-born and low-dwelling! Songless, peevish thing! You live not in the upper air and you cannot tell the sound of singing." Then the autumn leaf lay down upon the earth and slept. And when spring came she waked again — and she was a blade of grass.

And when it was autumn and her winter sleep was upon her, and above her through all the air the leaves were falling, she muttered to herself, "O these autumn leaves! They make such noise! They scatter all my winter dreams."

(From: *The Madman, Said a Blade of Grass*)

Using multiple points of view, Gibran speaks of a common source of all beings, and hints at the essential unity and interdependence of all beings.

You are my brother, and both of us are sons of a single, universal, and sacred spirit. You are my likeness, for we are prisoners of the same body, fashioned from the same clay. You are my companion on the byways of life, my helper in perceiving the essence of reality concealed behind the mists. You are a human being and I have loved you, my brother.

(From: *The Vision, On Human Unity*)

From a distance, he draws logical connections in the multiplicity which allows us to grasp what unites. We may consider ourselves superior or inferior to another human being, but if we delve deeper into our nature, we may realize that the differences are very superficial. Deep inside we share the same weaknesses; we are all under the bondage of our own desires and fears, seeking freedom from the same cage.

***In my father's garden there are two cages.
In one is a lion, which my father's slaves brought from the desert of Ninavah;
In the other is a songless sparrow.
Everyday at dawn the sparrow calls out to lion,
"Good morrow to thee, brother prisoner.***

(From: *The Madman, The Two Cages*)

And before judging anyone else, let us first look deep inside our own selves, and it will make us humble.

Oftentimes have I heard you speak of one who commits a wrong as though he were not one of you, but a stranger unto you and an intruder upon your world. But I say that even as the holy and the righteous cannot rise beyond the highest which is in each one of you, so the wicked and the weak cannot fall lower than the lowest which is in you also.

(From: *The Prophet, On Crime and Punishment*)

He also speaks of the awakening of another subtle higher need that arises in such moments of truth, where we recognize the reality of the human condition, the bondages from which we all suffer. And from this reality arises the need to unite, the need to love, the need to give, and the need of altruism. This need is the glory of being human.

Throughout his works Gibran explains that this need lies in everyone. In some it is strong, and in others it is less strong. We may call it good and evil, but truly it is just different degrees of longing, of the need to love. The former expresses as overcoming personal limitations for the benefit of others, the latter to a lesser degree. Those who have a strong need must follow the force of love; even if it puts you on a journey and a road which is not always easy.

So it is best that our actions speak of our longing. Labour not to judge others or blame others; but strive to be better in our own actions. If you want to compare, then let it be only between you and yourself.

***When love beckons to you, follow him,
Though his ways are hard and steep.
And when his wings enfold you yield to him,
Though the sword hidden among his pinions may wound you.***

***And when he speaks to you believe in him,
Though his voice may shatter your dreams as the north wind lays waste the garden.***

***For even as love crowns you so shall he crucify you.
Even as he is for your growth so is he for your pruning.
Even as he ascends to your height and caresses your tenderest branches that quiver in the sun,
So shall he descend to your roots and shake them in their clinging to the earth.***

All these things shall love do unto you that you may know the secrets of your heart, and in that knowledge become a fragment of Life's heart.

(From: *The Prophet, On Love*) ★★★

