

## SINGING FROM THE SAME HYMNAL: SEARCHING FOR A COMMON BOND

**I**tem: For centuries, historians of religion have quietly noted that Islam and Christianity are derivatives of Judaism. Item: In 1991, the Christian and Muslim armies of thirty-eight countries gathered under the flag of the United Nations to free Kuwait from Saddam Hussein. Item: A few years later a DNA study conducted among Syrians, Palestinians, Lebanese, and Jews concluded that they share a common set of ancestors. Judging from these three random observations and facts, many of us are lighting our candles from a common torch, yet prospects for an enduring peace in the Middle East range from dim to dark. In such a climate, man's common humanity seems a hopeless subject, barely a dream at the start of the twenty-first century. Searching for a compatible human denominator brings those of us who would later major in English the despair we felt in the fifth grade when, grasping at numbers like floating straw, the only denominator we could find for two incongruous fractions was a fifty-seven. "Could it be? Please, dear Lord, let it be!"

Despite the complexities, mathematicians and scientists surely have enjoyed more success in the search than most. Harlow Shapley, former Director of the Harvard College Observatory, found the common denominator in the inert gas argon. Each human breath, Shapley calculated, is filled with  $3 \times 10^{19}$  argon atoms which have never combined with anything since the Big Bang. Consequently every breath that any of us takes contains roughly 300,000 of the argon atoms Saddam Hussein or George W. Bush or anyone else has breathed at some time in the past. Without argon, which makes up about one percent of the atmosphere, our lives would be largely unchanged (the gas is used primarily in welding and in insulating windows), but nitrogen, which makes up eighty percent of the atmosphere, is absolutely essential to all life. Shapley calculates "that every breath...contains, on average, three of the nitrogen atoms from any given human breath...." Is there anyone who would not feel more connected to the past, the cosmos, and his fellow humans reading these calculations?

Our mutual dependence on science was further illustrated in the 1960s by Raymond Fosdick of the Rockefeller Foundation when he noted the contributions of the global health community. While the world is guarded from polio by what an American did, Fosdick observed, humans are guarded from smallpox, rabies, pellagra, and diphtheria by what an Englishman, a Frenchman, an Austrian, and a Japanese respectively did. A similar service has been provided to domestic animals by the world's veterinary researchers. As the German Arab Hafid Habid once wondered playing off a notion expressed by Terence and Montaigne, "If your car is Japanese, your pizza Italian, your coffee Brazilian, your numbers Arabic or Indian, your alphabet Latin, your carpet Persian, and your democracy Greek, how can your neighbor be an alien?"

More importantly, how can ancient allies become adversaries as when France fell from favor in America for refusing to invade Iraq in 2003? Some American enophiles emptied their wine cellars of all French vintages. One wonders what these nationalists would have done had they known that French vines once had been saved by rootstocks from Missouri just as California vines were saved by rootstocks from France.

Today the discoveries of medical science often come to us after years of research and great expense, but one wonders sometimes if the time and money were well spent reinventing the truth. In the 1980s, scientists announced that three alcoholic drinks a day are permissible and may even be salubrious. Ironically, over two thousand years ago the

Greek philosopher Eubulus wrote, "Three bowls only do I mix for the temperate; one to health..., the second to love and pleasure, the third to sleep. When this bowl is drunk up, wise guests go home." A transcendentalist might have argued that the truth of the three-drink limit resided from the beginning in the Oversoul and that anyone has access to this universal truth if their perceptions are refined enough to extract it. A Jungian psychologist, on the other hand, might argue that this specific truth has resided in the collective or racial unconscious since about 8000 BC when humans began drinking alcoholic beverages and experiencing the consequences of overindulgence.

Regardless of the source of any medical or scientific discovery, one can only hope that the truths of biological mutuality make themselves known as soon as possible, for people of different races have far more in common than not. The difference in genetic material between any two humans on the globe is only one-ten-thousandth of a percent. Bone, organ, and blood transplants among the races have all been successfully performed. More than one white man sees the world today through the corneas of a black man and vice versa. In Brazil, about one quarter of all marriages are interracial. Furthermore in Europe and the Americas, Negro women have long suckled white children. And the melanin that makes a Mongolian's skin brown is chemically identical, though the concentration is different, to the substance that makes a Negro's hair and a Caucasian's freckles dark brown or black. Other biological differences among the three major races, such as the shape of hair cross sections and the width of noses, are absurdly superficial. The similarities should come as no surprise since all humans trace their lineage to a tribe of East African ape mutants who lived about four million years ago. Further differences of behavior and intellect, for example, are cultural and of doubtful validity. Despite differences, there are few Mongolians, Caucasians, and Negroes who are incapable of enjoying a cup of coffee while watching a re-run of "The Muppets" and chatting about the virtues of Fuji's film or Volkswagen's automobiles. Now if these representatives of the races are literate, the possibilities of discussion are almost endless.

Take the commonwealth of folk tales for instance. How many of us could not appreciate a tale from India in which words are employed as love charms, or a Jewish tale in which an angel is conceived in each of God's words, or a tale from Finland in which a hero searches for the magical words which will save his people, or a West Indian tale in which a literal reading of a text leads to a misinterpretation of some religious words? Stith Thompson who has recorded these folk motifs (are they dream motifs too?) also makes a reference to an English folk tale in which negligent priests are buried beneath bags filled with words never spoken in their church services. Stated without the trappings of culture, the folk motifs are scarcely foreign to us, but how are their similarities and common appeal to be accounted for? Jan Harold Brunvand has observed that there are two basic possibilities: the materials originated in one place and were diffused, or the materials came into existence independently in many places about the same time. Whatever the source of this folk wisdom, we have more reasons to form associations for our common benefit than not.

Like students of folklore, students of cultural anthropology in search of the common bond (though some would call it the Holy Grail) have recorded similar proverbs in several languages. Mario Pei has observed, "whether we use our own 'Too many cooks spoil the broth,' or the Italian 'With so many roosters crowing, the sun never comes up,' or the Japanese 'Too many boatmen run the boat up to the top of the mountain,' or the Persian 'Two captains sink the ship,' or the Russian 'With seven nurses, the child goes blind,'

the basic idea is the same.” Writers of proverbs, it seems, have drawn extensively from Emerson’s Oversoul and Jung’s racial memory even if the metaphors chosen are widely divergent. The figurative language in which most proverbs are couched is just a smoke screen; blow the smoke away, and the similarities in the following examples should be apparent. In a letter to a friend, Lord Byron once called hope a “hollow-cheeked harlot.” An anonymous Turk, who in all likelihood had never read Byron, observed, “He who lives on hope dies of hunger.” A Pole, equally ignorant of the British writer, stated, “He whose coach is drawn by hope has poverty for a coachman.” And a Dane once wrote, “Hope is a fool’s income.” Whether the metaphor is drawn from the realm of sex, food, transportation, or finance, the message concerning the fleeting sustenance of hope is the same. After a deep disappointment, I imagine that all four of these writers had grown cynical, and searching for a means to express themselves, they stumbled on their metaphors. What they felt was very nearly identical; how they expressed it naturally varied. One does not have to read very far in Sophocles and Moses before realizing that human emotional responses like grief and joy have not changed in three thousand years of human history.

Like proverbial literature, all cultures have their myths and legends which are remarkably similar. Hardly a society exists, as students of cross-cultural mythology have learned, that does not have its flood, birth-of-the-sun, or racial-differences myth. Likewise, basic artistic themes like man’s quest for freedom, and subjects like birth and death are universal. Observe also the wide appeal of French film, African sculpture, Italian painting, American jazz, and Japanese poetry. Were aesthetic tastes formed before our ancestors migrated out of East Africa about 50,000 years ago? How is it that children around the world have their own version of *our* Pig Latin, *our* jump-rope rhymes, and *our* superstitions? I have no better answer than the Transcendentalists’ Oversoul, but here are several more illustrations of our fascinating mutuality.

Iona and Peter Opie, who initially studied the lore and language of schoolchildren in England, Wales, and Scotland, noticed a great similarity of custom when children say the same word at the same time. The custom usually entails linking fingers and making a wish. The similarity was so striking that the Opies informally broadened their study of these ceremonies to include Ireland, Italy, Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Spain, Bolivia, and Egypt. Concluding, the Opies stated:

It appears, indeed, that the rite would bear detailed investigation in the U.S., and possibly throughout the world, for the coincidence of two people accidentally saying the same thing at once is marked by some little ceremony in every country in which we have made inquiry, and almost invariably it aims at influencing or finding out about the future.

Why the Opies omitted the United States is indeed odd, but I can assure them that American children have been linking fingers and making wishes for generations.

Like the children of the world in the Opie’s study, those who write on walls, sidewalks, and other public surfaces also have much in common. Robert Reisner and Lorraine Wechsler, who compiled the *Encyclopedia of Graffiti*, have noted how similar men and women’s motives for writing are, especially in the privacy of a public toilet. The wall, as these editors argue, becomes a therapist for the graffitist, for the deepest and darkest impulses are expressed

there. Not uncommonly, there are many similarities in the fundamental and usually vulgar expressions of hostility, scatology, fantasy, and propaganda. To take one mild set of examples, the editors observe that an Englishman once wrote, "How shall the Man e'er turn to dust who daily wets his clay with ale." Echoing this sentiment, an American wrote, "Old Granddad is dead but his [alcoholic] spirits live on." The graffitist universally writes to say, "I exist, and this wall is my outlet." That alcohol and other intoxicants may be responsible for some of what Wallace Stevens called mankind's "necessary fictions" is a denominator that goes a long way toward helping humanists discover what we have in common.

As proponents of Esperanto have been saying for a century, a common language, as Latin used to be in Christendom, would be very useful in the world peace process. Of course, English is already functioning as a *lingua franca* and has been since the end of World War II. Words and phrases like *Internet, computer, airport, passport, hotel, telephone, bar, soda, Coke, Marlboro, McDonalds, sport, gold, tennis, stop, OK, weekend, jeans, know-how, sex appeal*, and *no problem* are virtually universally understood. One is no longer surprised to hear of the Filipino second grader living in Frankfurt, who when asked to bring some authentic cuisine representative of the child's homeland, brought the class a hamburger. What is surprising is that many Germans don't know that the hamburger minus the bun originated in Germany. "Run a 'burger through the garden," and it's thoroughly American, but one may buy one in most countries of the world.

If this reciprocity is beginning to sound vaguely inevitable or deterministic, a brief examination of color terminology should be reassuring. While blue, for example, in English connotes Puritanism, melancholy, and the aristocracy among other things, the same color in Italian means soft (as in *a blue voice*). In French it refers to a political conservative, and in German it suggests mild intoxication. The connotations of red, furthermore, show a similar confusion: in English *to see red* is to be angry; *a red tale* in Spanish is an indelicate one; in Italian the yolk of the egg is the red, and in Russia a *red speaker* is not surprisingly an eloquent one. In fact, anything red in Russian is beautiful or valuable though that has been changing since the demise of the Soviet Union. Perhaps the Tower of Babel is responsible for these disparities, but it is interesting that pink is everywhere in the world more positive than negative, and yellow is everywhere the reverse at least in phrases in which these colors are found. Such similarities can probably be explained by the universal high regard for blood and health, and the fear that all cultures have for disease, which is often manifested by a yellowing leaf or limb. More difficult to explain is the unanimity Brent Berlin and Paul Kay found among the world's languages: no language, it appears, has more than eleven basic color terms. If a language has only two basic terms, these are always black and white. A language with three basic terms will have acquired black, white, and red; one with four terms will have black, white, red, and either green or yellow; one with five will have black, white, red, green, and yellow; one with six will add blue to the preceding five; and one with seven will include brown. If a language has eight, nine, ten, or eleven basic terms, it will have acquired purple, pink, orange or gray, but not in any predictable sequence.

Berlin and Kay make a very strong case for cultural unanimity, but a survey of gestures leaves one awash again in the flux. Sticking one's tongue out can mean anything from defiance and disdain in the U.S., to a welcome in Polynesia, respect in Tibet, teasing in Jordan, and copulation in Colombia. Dropping one's pants and flaunting one's naked buttocks, on the other hand, is regarded as insulting most everywhere in the world. Dur-

ing the 1967 stalemate between China and Russia, for instance, an entire platoon of Chinese soldiers marched to the front lines, dropped their trousers, and bowed in a southerly direction. But in Lapland, the “moon” is believed to blunt enemy swords, and in Pomerania, if the buttocks are female, “mooning” prevents the flight of bees. It has been estimated that body language may be responsible for over 70% of what humans communicate face to face. Gestures like rubbing one’s belly (“That was a good meal.”) or cupping one’s ear (“Speak louder.”), therefore, come as close to a *lingua franca* as the Hawaiian *aloha* and the Spanish *adios*.

Turning to religion, seriousness must prevail though humor is a major cultural denominator that has only been hinted at in these pages. Every culture, it seems, has a variation on, “Is that a banana/spear/pistol in your pocket, or are you just glad to see me?” Religion, however, like humor, is an element shared by all. Observe the importance and the similarities of incest taboos and of birth, marriage, and death ceremonies worldwide. Helpfully, Jeffrey Moses, in his book *Oneness*, has collected many of the moral tenets which adherents of the world’s great religions share. These include: “Honor thy father and mother,” “Heaven is within us,” “Conquer with love, not revenge,” “You are known less by your words than your actions,” “Judge not lest you be judged,” “Follow the spirit rather than the letter of the law,” and “God is love.” But the foundation of the ecumenical movement may very well be the universality of the altruistic ideal. It is comforting that the golden rule of Confucianism is, “What you don’t want done to yourself, don’t do to others.” For the Buddhists the rule is, “Hurt not others with that which pains yourself,” and for at least nine other major religions across the globe, Christianity included, the same idea is not just an ethical proposition, but the *Golden Rule*. Perhaps that is cause for hope, perhaps not because these “rules” have been in place for close to three millennia. Good news, it seems, travels exceedingly slow. At any rate you will have something to talk about the next time you take a Muslim to lunch where a sign in the window may well read, “Come in, or we’ll both starve.”

No where have people “come in” in the last thirty years quite the way they have entered sports arenas and stadiums the world over. In 2002, for example, when Yao Ming first played for the Houston Rockets, an estimated 300 million people tuned in the game in China and presumably rooted for the Rockets. So much for the value of rooting; that season the Rockets finished fifth in the Midwest division. In the same year, 201 nations sent at least one representative to the Olympic Games; that’s ten more member nations than the United Nations claimed at the same time. Back home some two billion fans watched the home team on television. Of course, the 10,500 athletes competing in Athens needed 45,000 security personnel, but that’s a story for another day. As Isaac Newton discovered, the falling apple is attracted to the earth just as the earth is drawn to the apple. The same might be said of most any ball used in sport—the entire globe, it appears, is drawn to the ball especially at massive tournaments like the World Series, the Stanley Cup finals, and the most global of all, the World Cup of Soccer.

Art shall be my final venue even if its numbers are not as dramatic as sports. Because of the billions of fans drawn to sport, there is a natural divide between athletics and art that continues to widen, for few who are drawn to sport are drawn to art with the same intensity. Nevertheless, conductor Seiji Ozawa bridged the sport-art gulf effectively in the opening ceremonies of the Winter Olympics held at Nagano, Japan in 1998. He positioned choruses on each of the five continents and led them all simultaneously via a television satellite connection even as he conducted an orchestra in Nagano in a performance of

Beethoven's "Ode to Joy." And a joyful, uplifting performance it was, for man's arbitrary boundaries are no obstacle to electronic transmissions and nature.

Another Japanese artist, Yukinori Yanagi, has brilliantly underscored nature's indifference to human boundaries in an installation entitled *World Flag Ant Farm* (1990). Mounted on two connected museum walls, the work consists of 182 Plexiglas boxes each containing a flag made of colored sand representing a sovereign nation. (At the time of the installation, there were 182 member states in the U.N.) Once the sand had been painstakingly poured into the boxes and the flags had taken shape, Yanagi connected each box to its neighbors by a network of plastic tubes. Into the boxes and tubes, he then released a colony of ants, who, of course, know nothing of the sacred nature of flags. Over the course of several months, the ants slowly deconstructed each flag, some more than others, as they transported parts of one "country" to another. One day we may all carry the "passport" that ants and birds have always enjoyed.

As Peter Farb has observed, "one society's sin may be another society's virtue." Certainly there is almost as much evidence in this essay for cultural relativity as there is against it; in fact, there may be no absolute truths among the world's cultures. But while two people may comprise a multitude, in divisive times, little is gained by dwelling on differences and belaboring the problems which divide us. Defining cultural distinctions can, of course, lead to greater understanding, but with the Four Horsemen of famine, poverty, war, and disease galloping across the Middle East and much of the rest of the world, it is well to recall the Hebrew psalmist's words, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity." Neither should one forget these words from the Koran, "Allah loves not those who create disorder."

#### FATHER-SON TALK

*For Shane*

Their talk in the parlor  
is dry and small—  
thoughtful speech blossoms  
when tossing a ball.