

The Archer

Once upon a time in ancient Japan, there was a young archer who was a dangerous man. He could shoot the eye out of a hawk a thousand feet in the sky, he could shoot three arrows at once and hit three targets dead center with his eyes closed, and in a duel no man could survive his aim. Very full of himself, he became an arrogant bully, and intimidated all the men in the town with his fatal prowess.

One day at the local sake bar, one of the villagers had a little too much to drink, and started ranting against the young archer. "He's not so tough!" he raved, with passionately slurred speech. "If he knew about the old man on the mountain he wouldn't be so cocky! The old man on the mountain could kick his butt with one hand tied behind his back! Ha!"

Little did the poor villager know that the young archer had appeared on the scene and had overheard this tirade. Incensed, the archer grabbed the villager by the lapels and screamed, "What old man! Who are you talking about? Where is he?"

The villager was terrified, suddenly sober, and stammered, "Forgive me sir, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, you're the best, you're the best, the old man is nothing to you, you're the best, he's probably dead anyway, I'm very drunk sir, please don't hurt me!"

But the archer's pride was inflamed, and nothing would do but that he prove himself against this unknown competitor. With the vaguest of directions, he wandered into the mountains looking for this old man. After months of fruitless searching, the archer came across a cave with a faint trail of smoke drifting out of its narrow mouth. He hailed the old man with angry shouts and brutal insults. At last, a wrinkled, white-haired figure emerged from the cave, an arrow in his hand.

Without preliminaries, the young archer began, "So, you're the archer, you're the other archer! Are you an Archer?"

"Yes, my son, I am an archer."

"Well, I'm the best archer in the world! I'm tons better than you, and I can prove it! You see that eagle soaring up there among the clouds? I can shoot that bird down with one shot!"

And without further ado, the young man took aim. But just as he was about to let fly his arrow, the old man interrupted and said, "You mean you need a bow to do that? "

Moral:

This is an old Zen story, and it illustrates the idea that if you are one with the material of your activity, the material itself becomes superfluous. The old man in the mountain was suggesting to the young archer that, if he was really spiritually wedded to the act of shooting the arrow, he ought to be able to bring down the eagle with his mind.

This is true of music. If you have truly acquired what I call the musical mind, the instrument that you hold in your hands is of no consequence. If the music is in your consciousness it will come out into the world as a living entity no matter how the sounds are created.

One of my favorite passages from the poetic literature is this section of Wallace Stevens' "Peter Quince at the Clavier".

"Just as my fingers on these keys
Make music, so the self same sounds
On my spirit make a music, too.

Music is feeling, then, not sound;
And thus it is that what I feel,
Here in this room, desiring you,

Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk,
Is music."

Modern Poetry, 1961, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentiss-Hall, Inc., 1961

The magic of music, the power of music comes from this: if you experience an inner reality and are able to duplicate that inner reality in the outer world, that outer representation will not only be truthful, it will be alive, alive with the consciousness and the power of higher mind.