

CobaltSaffron

A FREE MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

A true master

In a recent interview, I was waiting for the interviewer to ask me about the persons who influence my thinking or who represent the ideals and skills I write and speak of. The question never came, but it's been on my mind ever since, so I thought I'd give an example here.

There have been few individuals who have impressed me so much that my perception and understanding was permanently transformed. I've had some great teachers, those who have shared or evoked the brilliance and wisdom of others who came before them, but it's rare to meet or witness someone who can actually bend and form one's experiential comprehension of life. We sometimes get to see some of the work of a genuinely gifted individual, the finished product after the editing, refining and clean-up work has been done. We can find this in the arts now and then, in the presentations of a few deep thinkers, or in stories of now-dead geniuses who left some original, profoundly insightful work behind them. But to be in the presence of a full-on master in the act of creation, to see the dazzling mystery unravel before your eyes, is about as hard to find as someone who wants to make less money.

It's true that I probably have an unusual and overly exigent definition of *mastery*. The first thing I look for is what I call, "No buying or selling." That is, the choices of a master are pure, no attempt to buy the opinions of others or to sell an image or advice. Such a person's actions are unaltered by considerations of manipulation for self-gain at the expense of someone else. Conciliation with issues of responsibility and respect has already taken place. Conscience and subjective preference are in accord. There's no clever scheme or ultimate master plan, no appropriation or imitation of someone else, no attempt to hide mistakes, and no ritualized tics and accessories to prove that he's a member of an important club on a mission. Stripped-down, plain authenticity. That's a clean base.

Well beyond this, a master also makes a perfect link between his innate personal talents and skills and the requisite needs of his circumstance. He fulfills a purpose in a way that no one else could. And he does so with absolute commitment, making the most of everything and anything needed. There's no disproportionate habitual reliance on only one or two families of qualities, such as gentleness and kindness, or passivity and tolerance, or optimism and motivation, or intelligence and memory, or strength and power. There's a deeper balance in place, a core of supple versatility, most noticeable in the curious blending of opposites into a single quality, such as serene urgency. From there,

he exhibits an evident fearlessness run by the engine of fascination, an abandon born from being in love with the moment—unselfconscious devotion. This quality alone is what we find most compelling in the best performing artists.

Next, he's invested enough time, in research, experimentation and experience, so as to transcend already known technique. There is no conflict or gap between perception and application, no analytical hesitation to make sure everything's okay first; each gesture is spontaneous and intuitive. Individual moment-to-moment choices become a continuous graceful communion, wherein mind, emotion, body and spirit meld into a single unified force. There is no residual feel of a disciplined work ethic, or any particular identifiable technique or philosophy, as these have been organically sublimated into the act of doing what he loves. The circle is complete: the innocent child is liberated, free to go play...but now he has all the tools and acumen to really do so.

And, finally, it all has to work, and on time. It has to be objectively true. Meaning, the results are precise, discernable as being correct and viable solutions to the specific challenges and possibilities within the master's chosen arena. The proof of the mastery is in its functionality. Even though someone else probably can't imagine the effort, risks and detailed work that went into producing the results, one can at least sense that the results themselves are uniquely effective. Everyone in proximity benefits.

In most fields of work, only others who have sacrificed enough to achieve some level of expertise themselves would be able to perceive this depth of mastery. This is why, in most cases, the general population catches on only well after the master has died, if they do at all. For the average studied layman, any expression of real originality is going to grate against what he already recognizes and accepts. It looks like it doesn't fit within the frame, and, in a way, it doesn't; it causes the frame to expand into mysterious territory. Which is exactly what a true master does. He redefines reality.

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Anyway, I've kept my eyes out looking for such persons throughout most of my life, and I've met and been influenced by a few. It doesn't really matter much to me which frame or field of work they're in. I've found momentary, localized mastery in busboys, garbage men, postcard writers, gardeners and backstage technicians. The frame they're in most often has to allow for functional *and* original solutions; their colleagues have to value imaginative vision at least as much as traditional knowledge. That's partly why I've yet to find such mastery in the types of work which are considered to be the arenas for the “great masters.”

I think most of us miss the real masters because of our preconceived notions of a particular stereotype. Also, we're confused if there's not a big audience of adoring fans around them to verify their value (which explains why van Gogh sold only one painting, Herman Melville couldn't publish *Moby Dick*, and you never heard of Chester Westbury). There are a few exceptions to this dynamic, however. Now and then there's the real master and the adoring audience, even though the audience might not completely recognize exactly what's going on. And this is the case for a man I consider to be a true master at the peak of his game: Steve Nash.

Who? Well, you might not have heard of him unless you follow point guards in American professional basketball, probably not the most recognized arena for those looking for a master to give us clues to the great mysteries of the universe. But indeed he does do that.

Now, before you toss this newsletter, at least allow me to finish my explanation. Here is someone who came from nowhere near the traditional schools of entry into American professional basketball (raised in South Africa and then British Columbia), who looks nothing at all like his colleagues and opponents, who has mastered the art of creating possibilities for others in situations that appear to be impossible. In a field of work now made up of macho power players literally beating their chests and pumping their fists in the air at any tiny success (a phenomenon we can see in virtually every profession, including religious and political leaders), Steve Nash quietly and unassumingly floats under, between and over them to create, seize and dole out opportunities in an unmatched display of spontaneously inventive virtuosity. His surgical precision, while under extreme pressure in the midst of total chaos where every error will be seen and judged, is often delivered within timeframes of less than a second. Many of the subjects we have covered here, including the main theme of this newsletter, have no better living example I've seen in public view than Steve Nash.

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“Don't be fooled by the frame, especially if you don't like it,” is a line an old teacher of mine used to say all the time. It's a simple but great idea with important implications. Where do we actually learn the skills that will take us beyond the challenges we face? Where do we truly find the most refined qualities of the human spirit in perfect expression? Who are the individuals on the cutting-edge of our evolution? In what little hidden corners are the authentic masters working and playing?

The general opinion is that human greatness only, or at least mainly, shows itself on the platforms considered to be overtly generous and humane, as in saving the world, reducing human suffering, or articulating grand wisdom. But if we were to look carefully behind the scenes at the individuals who actually succeeded historically in advancing such projects, we'd find they embodied many or all of the qualities and skills listed above, especially in their internal processes. Anyone who is going to come up with a revelatory solution to anything—ideas and methods that enter into uncharted mystery, truth, if you will—is going to have to do basically what Steve Nash does. While others are meaning well in considering and giving their opinions about how to go about all that, especially on the overtly generous and humane platforms, he's actually doing it.

When you're fed up with the phony niceties, all the cute quotable aphorisms, the depressing stalled talks and ridiculous political positioning, the bowing and genuflecting and esoteric hand gestures, the smiling photo shoots in search of more money and members, the same-as-it-ever-was alibis and answers, I'd recommend you change the channel, kick back and watch a real master at play. Number 13 of the Phoenix Suns.

Comments

Thank you for your comments about the previous issue of CobaltSaffron. Excerpts from a few responses we received:

“I am writing to comment on your last newsletter. As always, thank you (and your team) so much for writing and distributing it; I very much enjoy reading them. Even when it contains news of someone missing the mark. I am sorry to hear that that happened, though I can't say I'm very surprised. It is not an uncommon experience for me to observe someone subtly twisting profound concepts to serve themselves. I can feel how much more disturbing it is, and how much further the implications reach, when it concerns someone in a position of power & authority. [...] Despite all this, I am writing to express my sadness that it appears you have chosen to not share a whole category of personal stories any longer because this one individual chose to abuse something freely given. Whether the newsletter contains certain kinds of personal anecdotes or not, any individual could still choose to misinterpret and/or abuse your words, maybe even in new and unpredictable ways. I for one get a level of connection with the text and/or story when it contains personal anecdotes that is unique and very valuable to me.”

C. A., California.

“About your last newsletter...it first scared me a bit. I found it violent, I thought, ‘How dare he, that’s hard!’ This thought rapidly disappeared to give place to an admiring, ‘Wow’ and the ‘Wow’ became bigger: ‘Great that he dare, that’s a way to protect beauty.’ That’s one answer (amongst others, I think) to the question ‘how to protect beauty.’ So, I was impressed.”

G.V., Belgium.

“To all at CobaltSaffron: My sincere apologies for anything I did to create ‘disbelief, sadness and outrage’ for any of you, and I would welcome feedback on what exactly it was. In re-reading my email I can see how I might have come across as cutesy or arrogant—that was certainly not my intent—and if so, I am sorry. If I somehow created the impression of irresponsibility or disrespecting women or the work of personal evolution, I am mortified and would like to know how. I would appreciate your help in examining my potential blind spots.”

Anonymous.

“After taking a few days to ponder, I wanted to show my support and express my personal frustration and thoughts to you. Your newsletter has indeed confronted us all with the enemy. I was amazed to witness such a RAW reaction to your story—words such as ‘lust,’ ‘terror,’ ‘trust in others’ all mixed up in a twisted way, and all dipped with this ‘delightful’ arrogance. [...] After letting it all reside within me, when all of my frustration and anger subsided, I did find surprisingly that what I was really left with is the range of qualities your response carried. In my opinion your response carries a great value for the community, for me personally it has transformed this abuse into a

valuable and insightful lesson. It seems that in one quick stroke of the pen you managed to convey certain qualities and draw the line in such a decisive, clear manner. It made me think, it made me feel, it inspired me to look inside within myself and confront what I fear the most—my own misuse of responsibilities, freedom and talents. Or, as I would put it, whoring out my own ‘delightful brilliance.’ Thank you for that certain response, it touched my core.”

S. S., California.

Upcoming event:

Seminar

February 11 & 12, 2006, San Francisco - USA

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Concept, design, editing and translation:

John Mitchell, Isabelle Calkins, Karen Strassman, Christian Demeuré-Vallée

We welcome questions, comments and complaints.

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