

THIS 11TH CENTURY ARABIC JEWISH PARABLE IS A MOTTO FOR OUR TIMES

Make the cost of living your life your first expenditure; not your last

I am in the middle of writing the script for a podcast; so not as focused as I would like to be as a new MEDIUM writer. But I suddenly felt the need to take a minute to talk about the eleventh-century Arabic Jewish parable that speaks volumes towards what people need to hear in these times.

Bahya Ibn Pakuda was an eleventh-century Jewish moralist who lived in Al-Andalus; otherwise known as Muslim Spain. Ibn Pakuda tells the story of a traveler who was making their way through a harsh and dangerous countryside. The traveler found themselves stuck at a riverbank where the water was too deep to be crossed. But they had already made their way too far to be able to turn back. Desperately searching for a solution, the traveler grabbed a purse of gold coins which contained all of their material wealth. In order to get across, they began tossing gold pieces in hopes of creating a path in which they could traverse across the river. But to no avail. Finally down to their last gold piece, the traveler spotted a far off ferry boat that they in their distracted panic had failed to notice earlier. The traveler regretted having tossed away all their gold for nothing, but was emphatically relieved to have one more gold piece which they could use to purchase safe passage across the river.

Of course this being a strictly religious parable, its original intention was to highlight the necessity of repentance as a believer's first expenditure, rather than their last. The purse of gold coins is a metaphor for a believer's spiritual wealth; too often believers throw away their connection to god by making repentance their last resort and after having desperately tossed away much of their dignity.

With respect to the parable and its author, the story can still be framed outside its original context.

Too often we wait for intense moments in our collective lives, such as this one, to truly focus on who we are and the stock we hold for the lives we want to lead. And even then, these desperate times more often than not encourage us to toss away our dignity (and often our literal wealth too) recklessly rather than focus on what is just in our periphery--our purpose in life; our passage across the river.

So I encourage you to really take this time to breathe and focus on what that path across the river means for you.

For me, I've discovered that it's writing. I spent so much time at the beginning of this pandemic wallowing over how the rug had been pulled out from under me. I put so many of my eggs into the basket of trying to "make it" as an actor that I knew there was no going back. I had already sacrificed so much comfort and so many relationships in order to make my way across the harsh

and dangerous countryside. And I love acting. Still do. But with everything shutting down and me at the relative beginning of my career, I was under the desperate illusion that there was also no possibility of going forward either.

It took me a few weeks to realize that before, during, and after this pandemic, I *never* had to wait for permission or to depend on others to give me the opportunity to act or be creative. I can still write and make my own work; work I can act in. And that was an option that was always available to me pandemic or not, despite my fear and inability to realize it.

Now I am having an amazing time waking up at four in the morning just to make sure I get a little bit of writing done. And once I've produced my podcast I'll have it up and running on my website, mohammadshehata.com

For you, it might mean something completely different. It might mean finally choosing to get to know family members you've neglected because you know you miss them, or finally prioritizing control over an underlying health condition that you've been trying to ignore, or volunteering for those who suffer most at the hands of the status quo because you know that helping people is one thing you need to do in your life.

You don't have to tax your mental and physical health panicking and feeling helpless. If anything, this is a time to really focus and take advantage of the options you *do* have. And it should be a reminder that we only ever have the present moment. So whatever it is you know you need to do, get on with it as your first expenditure and not as a last resort. Stop tossing away your spiritual currency and just use the one coin you need to buy passage with the boat that has always been there.

The boat is simply what you were called upon in this life to do. Whatever it is that gets you up in the morning. You already know what that is.

I hope to see you on the other side of that river.

Mohammad Shehata's blog. mohammadshehata.com