



The Perfume

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Once upon a time, in a small town, situated near a big desert, lived a smart, energetic and intelligent young man called Abdullah. He had achieved great success as a merchant at an early age and was recognized as a prominent person in the town. Yet Abdullah, with all his success, was not very satisfied and kept inquiring from every body that visited the town about the ultimate secret of life and happiness.

One day a pious old man who was traveling alone to Mecca came to the town. Abdullah, as usual, asked the old man about the ultimate secret of real happiness. "There is a black deer in the desert with a musk-gland hidden in its naval if you can get this Musk you will be eternally happy," told the old man. Abdullah was so excited with the truth that he even forgot to ask any thing more about the ways to reach and catch the black deer.

The next day early morning, Abdullah was standing on the edge of the desert looking for the black deer. As soon as he wanted to start his search he realized that in a boundless and open desert he could travel in any direction. He soon realized that he would never be able to know if he was searching the deer in the correct direction. There was no surety that he would ever reach the black deer to get the musk. He cursed himself for not asking any details from the old man and was about to drop the idea of search when he saw some footprints of the deer on the desert sand. He thanked Allah for the clue and started to follow the footprints. Soon he became so efficient in recognizing the footprints that he started running. He was now very sure to reach the deer and the Musk.

In his zeal and excitement he did not even realize that he had spent almost the entire day following on the trail. Soon the sunset and it was dark. Abdullah could no more see the trail or the footprints. He was now deep in the desert and totally lost. He once again repented and cursed himself for not asking the details from the old man. He was now also very scared because he knew that any time he could become the prey of a wild beast in the desert. He thought that he would sure now die. Either a wild animal will eat him up or he will die of hunger and thirst. As he dropped down and quietly sat on the sand he heard in the absolute silence of the desert a weak sound of breaking of dry leaves as if some thing is walking in the near vicinity. He realized that all was not lost; if he could not see because of darkness he could definitely hear, and hearing the sound gave him more certainty about the presence of the deer than seeing the footprints.

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The zeal returned and the search started again. Some more time passed Abdullah was now even deeper in the desert. Then suddenly the sound also stopped; probably the deer realized that it was being followed. Abdullah was once again struck with panic and anxiety. He thought this is now really the end and death did not look very far. He repented the very idea of searching the secret of ultimate happiness. He remembered how much wealth he had and with that how comfortably he could live all his life. He recollected the enormous respect he was offered by the people of the town. He wished if he could just undo all this and go back to the comfortable and luxurious life that was within his reach.

This time, like a man who is sure to die, he uttered the prayer formula of the dead, asked forgiveness for the sins and was ready to die. Expecting the attack of a wild beast any moment he heaved a long cold breath but then most unexpectedly with the breath came the fragrance of the Musk. Abdullah jumped to his feet with enormous energy and happiness. The scent of the Musk in the air assured Abdullah of the nearness to the black deer and of his success like nothing else could. It was now just a matter of few more steps before Abdullah would be in possession of the Musk and achieving the eternal happiness.

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Interpretation

It is always a risk to interpret a metaphor because even the most profound interpretation is a kind of fixation of the non-formal. It invariably robs the message off some of its richness which can otherwise be communicated in an effective manner. However, this is what can be said after reading the story.

The search of the Musk (Truth) has three stages. The first pertains to the mind; the second to the soul and the third belongs to the heart (spiritual).

The first stage of the struggle, trailing the footprints with the faculty of vision leading, is the search of truth with the Mind. While vision/Mind has a long range in space, being dependent on daylight/logic has a serious limitation in time. In the spiritual journey, a stage comes when the skills of vision/Mind just cannot play any role regardless of their availability and quantitative abundance.

The second stage of the search carried out during the night pertains to the domain of the soul and here the faculty of hearing leads the struggle. The important difference is in the level of certainty and intimacy. It is common experience that the scare caused by seeing a snake is far less than the fear caused by the sound created by crawling of a snake on dry leaves. Hearing is somehow more intimate than vision. The range of hearing is not only shorter and narrower in space; its effectiveness is dependent on the absence of background noise. Silence of the class that is prevalent in a desert during the night is a precondition to be created within the soul to be able to hear the whispering of the Truth in the heart.

The third stage in which the olfactory faculty plays the crucial role pertains to the spiritual domain. Scant, aroma and perfume which the wind can carry are associated with the most subtle that is the spiritual. It is still narrower in its range than the preceding one. For aroma to spread a slight wind almost near stillness (nirvana) is a necessary condition that is even more difficult to achieve than silence and reducing the clutter. The perfumed environment even when the Musk is a short distance away can be destroyed by strong winds. The level of certainty in this stage is the highest and intimacy with truth is at its extreme.

What is very important to note is that each stage is successively narrower than the previous one but with greater certainty and intimacy. The success of the visual stage is in reaching a point of close proximity with truth where hearing is possible and similarly the success of audio stage is to reach a point of even greater closeness where scent of the Musk takes charge and guides any Abdullah. The mental and logical search has to be wide and large to be able to enter the arena of hearing and similarly the hearing that is the soul must be clean enough to be able to allow the Musk scent to reach us. The third is the presence of the spiritual itself.