

The Pseudonymous Writings of Kahlil Gibran

On Earth

By

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It was almost a hundred years ago, in 1923, that Alfred A. Knopf published *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran. It is a beloved mixture of fiction, poetry, art, philosophy, religion, and pure eloquence with influences from Christianity, Islam, Sufism, Bahai, Transcendentalism, Romanticism, Modernism, and Surrealism. It was written by an author born in 19th century Lebanon who began his literary career in Arabic but wrote *The Prophet* as a 20th century American in English. Perhaps its eclectic origins and content helps explain why it has since been translated into more than a hundred languages, has never gone out of print, and continues to sell thousands of copies round the world every day.

The book begins with the Prophet Al Mustafa climbing a hillside in the city of Orphalese, where he has been stranded twelve years awaiting a ship to come and return him to his homeland. This is the day, of course, that he finally spies the ship's arrival. "Then the gates of his heart flung open, and joy flew far over the sea. And he closed his eyes and prayed in the silences of his soul."¹

But as he descended the hill, heading toward the harbor, an unexpected sadness came over him. "Too many fragments of the spirit have I scattered in these streets, and too many are the children of my longing that walk naked in these hills, and I cannot withdraw from them without a burden and an ache."² Yet Al Mustafa, whose name means "Chosen One," knew he could not remain in the place he only now realized had become a second home. For, "A voice cannot carry the tongue and the lips that gave it wings. Alone must it seek the ether. And alone and without his nest shall the eagle fly across the sun."³

The people of Orphalese also saw the ship's arrival and understood what it meant. Like Al Mustafa, they hadn't fully considered the impact his eventual departure would have. "And the elders of the city stood forth and said: Go not away from us. A noontime have you been in our twilight, and your youth has given us dreams to dream. No stranger are you among us, nor a guest, but our son and our dearly beloved. Suffer not yet our eyes to hunger for your face."⁴

"And the priests and priestesses said unto him ... Much have we loved you. But speechless was our love, and with veils it has been veiled. Yet it now cries aloud unto you, and would

¹ Gibran, Kahlil, *The Prophet*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, NY, 1923, p. 3.

² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³ *Ibid.*, p.4f.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

stand revealed before you. And ever has it that love knows not its own depth until the hour of separation.”⁵

Al Mustafa said nothing. “He only bent his head; and those who stood near saw his tears falling upon his breast.”⁶

But a wise woman, a seeress named Almitra, came from within the city temple, the first person to have welcomed Al Mustafa and to call him a Prophet of God. “And now your ship has come,” she said, “and you must needs go. Deep is your longing for the land of your memories and the dwelling place of your greater desires; and our love would not bind you nor our needs hold you.”⁷

But before his departure, Almitra asked that he leave them with his truth. “And we will give it to our children, and they unto their children, and it shall not perish. In your aloneness you have watched with our days, and in your wakefulness you have listened to the weeping and the laughter of our sleep. Now therefore disclose us to ourselves, and tell us all that has been shown you of that which is between birth and death.”⁸

And so the scene is set. The Prophet is asked to share the sum of his wisdom before his departure. What follows is sublime poetry that elevates the ordinary and practical concerns of human life to heavenly heights. The Prophet’s liquid, floral prose is so serene it’s easy for the reader to miss the earthly nature of his subject. He isn’t speaking of God, or of the afterlife, or of the secret meaning of ancient religious texts. He is asked to speak of simple matters that have impacted human existence since it’s awakening: love, marriage, children, eating and drinking, clothing, housing, crime and punishment, laws, pain, and so forth.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin famously said, “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.” Yet in his flawless mastery of the English language, Gibran almost invisibly flips this paradox to indicate human experience is spiritual experience to begin with, there is no such dichotomy. Our ordinary earthly experiences are the most profound, and the only incubator of insight, meaning, and growth, not the flights of fancy we imagine transcend the human condition.

“Then said Almitra, Speak to us of Love.” To which the Prophet partly replied: “Love has no other desire but to fulfill itself. But if you love and must needs have desires, let these be your desires: To melt and be like a running brook that sings its melody in the night. To know the pain of too much tenderness. To be wounded by your own understanding of love; and to

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p. 10.

bleed willingly and joyfully.”⁹ He said these things because he understood the joy of love is accompanied by suffering. “When love beckons you, follow him, though his ways are hard and steep. And when his wings enfold you yield to him, though the sword hidden among his pinions may wound you. And when he speaks to you believe in him, though his voice may shatter your dreams as the north wind lays waste the garden.”¹⁰

From love, to marriage, to having children, to building a home, ordinary people ask the Prophet for advice about ordinary things, which he responds to in extraordinary ways.

“Love one another, but make not a bond of love: Let it rather be a moving seas between the shores of your souls. Fill each other’s cup but drink not from one cup ... Give your hearts, but not into each other’s keeping. For only the hand of Life can contain your hearts. And stand together yet not too near together: For the pillars of the temple stand apart, and the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other’s shadow.”¹¹

“And a woman who held a babe against her bosom said, Speak to us of Children. And he said: Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life’s longing for itself. They come through you but not from you, and though they are with you yet they belong not to you. You may give them your love but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts. You may house their bodies but not their souls, for their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.”¹²

“Then said a rich man, Speak to us of Giving. And he answered: You give but little when you give of your possessions. It is when you give of yourself that you truly give. For what are your possessions but things you keep and guard for fear you may need them tomorrow? ... And what is fear of need but need itself. Is not dread of thirst when your well is full the thirst that is unquenchable?¹³ ... For in truth it is life that gives until life—while you, who deem yourself a giver, are but a witness.”¹⁴

“Then an old man, a keeper of an inn, said, Speak to us of Eating and Drinking. And he said ... When you kill a beast say to him in your heart, ‘By the same power that slays you, I too am slain; and I too shall be consumed. For the law that delivered you into my hand shall deliver me into a mightier hand’¹⁵ ... And when you crush an apple with your teeth, say to it in your heart, ‘Your seeds shall live in my body, and the buds of your tomorrow shall blossom in my

⁹ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 11.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 15f.

¹² Ibid., p. 17.

¹³ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 23.

heart, and your fragrance shall be my breath, and together we shall rejoice through all the seasons.”¹⁶

“The a ploughman said, Speak to us of Work. And he answered saying: You work that you may keep pace with the earth and soul of the earth. For to be idle is to become a stranger to the seasons ... Always you have been told that work is a curse and labour a misfortune. But I say to you that when you work you fulfil a part of earth’s furthest dream, assigned to you when that dream was born, and keeping yourself with labour you are in truth loving life. And to love life through labour is to be intimate with life’s inmost secret.”¹⁷

Then a woman said, Speak to us of Joy and Sorrow. And he answered: Your joy is sorrow unmasked. And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears ... The deeper that sorrow carves into you being, the more joy you can contain. Is not the cup that holds your wine the very cup that was burned in the potter’s oven? ... Some of you say, ‘Joy is greater than sorrow,’ and other say, ‘Nay, sorrow is the greater.’ But I say unto you they are inseparable.”¹⁸

“Then a mason came forth and said, Speak to us of Houses. And he answered and said ... Your house is your larger body. It grows in the sun and sleeps in the stillness of the night; and it is not dreamless. Does not your house dream? And dreaming, leave the city for the grove or hill-top?¹⁹ ... Your house shall be not an anchor but a mast ... You shall not dwell in tombs made by the dead for the living²⁰ ... For that which is boundless in you abides in the mansion of the sky, whose door is the morning mist, and whose windows are the songs and the silences of night.”²¹

“And a merchant said, Speak to us of Buying and Selling. And he answered and said ... It is in exchanging the gifts of the earth that you shall find abundance and be satisfied. Yet unless the exchange be in love and kindly justice, it will but lead some to greed and others to hunger.”²²

“And an orator said, Speak to us of Freedom. And he answered ... You shall be free indeed when your days are not without a care nor your nights without a want and a grief, but rather when these things girdle your life and yet you rise above them naked and unbound.”²³

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 25f.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 29f.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 31.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 33.

²¹ Ibid., p. 34.

²² Ibid., p. 37.

²³ Ibid., p. 47f.

And the priestess spoke again and said: Speak to us of Reason and Passion. And he answered, saying ... Your reason and your passion are the rudder and the sails of your seafaring soul ... Therefore let your soul exalt your reason to the height of passion, that it may sing; And let it direct your passion with reason, that your passion may live through its own daily resurrection, and like the phoenix rise above its own ashes."²⁴

Throughout the entire day the people of Orphalese asked the Prophet about their practical concerns. A teacher wishes to know about teaching, a youth about friendship, a scholar about talking, an astronomer about time, a poet about beauty, and a priest about religion. But when evening came, Al Mustafa said his goodbyes, boarded his ship, and faded into the darkness of the night's sea.

Kahlil Gibran died in New York City, in 1931, at age 48. Although he authored dozens of articles and twelve other books, including a sequel to his masterpiece, entitled *The Garden of the Prophet*, published posthumously in 1933, nothing has had the staying power of *The Prophet*, which I'm betting all of you have heard of and many have a copy of if in your home. Although many of the themes addressed in the *The Prophet* are perennial, I can't help but wish one with such wisdom were here today for us to ask about the most pressing concerns of our own lives. What would he say to us of systemic racism, or of tyrants, or pandemics, or global warming?

Fortunately, only recently, a collection of pseudonymous writings of Kahlil Gibran have been discovered, in which he responds to some of these queries. I may address others in the future, but I thought I would begin with his reflections on Earth, since he often references our connection to the earth, and, again, *The Prophet* is a book about our most earthly concerns. It's also a great tribute to Mother's Day.

Then a Gardner came forward and said, Speak to us of the Earth.

And he said:

Disdain not the Earth, lest you disdain yourself,
For you are *of* the Earth, and you are the Earth.
Till her soil, and scratch your own skin,
Tend her gardens, and cultivate your own being.
Harvest her fruits, and taste your own worth.
So do not forget her in your doings, lest you forget yourself.

The Earth is the mother of all beings.

Pulling each into her unceasing embrace, she holds them tight against her bosom, and nourishes all with everlasting love.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 50f.

Yet a lover of leaving is the Father of Life, summoning you to rise tall toward heavenly charts.

Mother pulls and Father pushes.

Mother holds and Father releases.

Yet even as one foot lifts away, the other rests more firmly upon the ground.

Hence do you move through life, lifting and falling, rising and sinking, holding and releasing, forgetting and remembering who you are.

Yet by resisting her love, you gain the strength to crawl,

Then to walk,

Then to leap and climb.

The firmer her hold, the more independent you grow,

Until her love makes you strong enough to surmount the highest heights,

And surmount them you must.

Yet your Mother's love never ends, and her embrace is the widest of hoops.

It fills the valleys like morning mist and tucks away the mountains with fresh blankets of snow and night.

Only by pressing down can you lift yourself up.

Your days pass in ascension, yet each ends nestled flat against her clay pillow,

Until you reach the highest peak, then spend your last eve nestled soft against the quiet rhythms of her pulse.

And though you depart the home of your larger body to befriend the seasons and seek your house of tomorrow,

Notice the Mother's hearth encompasses you everywhere.

Say your noontime prayers within a cathedral of cedars,

Hear her hymns and lullabies sung beside a babbling brook or lazy river,

Look to the mountains to find stillness in your haste and strength in your fatigue.

Let the harsh sunlight she's kneaded into green fields and forests satisfy your hungry eyes,

And in seeing all these things, remember who you are, and that your journey away is but the path of your own returning.

Speak of the Earth, you say? Listen to your own heart and let her speak for herself.

Or to the sound of the lark at the breaking of day,

Or to the harmony of frogs and cicadas singing to the silent night,

Or to a soft breeze brushing her hair of golden grains,

Or to the crunch of a forbidden pear stolen from the Garden of Eden,

Or to a gentle rain stepping softly upon her back like the sounds of your own footsteps.

Only then shall you know the Earth and, hence, come to deeply know yourself, where you come from, the path you are upon, and the end of your journey.

You are both the container and the contained: the clay pot, its emptiness, and its longing to hold itself.

So speak not of the Earth, but listen for the beating of your own heart within the symphony of her sacred music.