

## At Leonard's last night and After Leonard's last night

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(Reflections addressed to friends the morning after Leonard Cohen's 6<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2010 Brisbane concert; with commentary five years after his death on 7<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2016.)

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### The morning after 6<sup>th</sup> November 2010 - part I

Last night all seating in the horrible Boondall auditorium was opened and all seats were occupied. From the very start the audience was fully there. Leonard promised that they would give us everything they had. And they did. During the first three songs my eyes were moist and my face was stretched freely smiling. I would not have cared had I cried outright as I could have a few times later. The smile only left my face when the song told me otherwise. Mostly it remained there. I beamed.

In his music, and the way it has always been arranged, Leonard is such a European, expressing the best of that, touching Jewish, Gypsy, Greek, Spanish roots (and therefore with a little of the Middle East), resonating from the dance and music halls of European cities, and, like Chagall paintings, from the folk life of the shtetl, ghetto and open town. As well as religious song. (There is also another kind of European phantom there I think, but I will leave that for now.)

It is an odd juxtaposition, the very old, from an immersive social life, taken up to express the, no longer new, highly individualised (for better and for worse), deracinated, anonymous personal life in modern cities. The language of religion weaves through his songs; the rhythms, the structure, and the actual words. But he does not so much infuse the popular with the religious, as use that language of worship, praise, and inwardness to portray human-to-human recognition, in love, sex, resistance. Leonard's whole trope is a language of grace, respect, and meaning, in human contact. As I walked to the train I overheard a man saying to his partner "If you can't see his face it's no good". His face – says it all. The screens are better than blurred figures, but my seat was in the middle of the third row and I had his face, their faces and bodies, right before me. So I was directly experiencing the living

out on stage of his images and narratives of face-to-face, of conversation, and, even when a song is more monologic, declarations that were always to a Thou, directed at someone fully alive.

When he uses the language of disrespect, which he often does (I will come to his satire later), it is almost always with mockery, usually a disrespecting form, but somehow the two negatives cancel each other out; or it is wry, he shines humour on it to expose what it is doing, the harm, even, as is usually the case, when the character L. Cohen is present as the doer of harm, or the claimer of restitution for harm done to him. The humour exposes the inauthenticity, or hoses down the claims. So most of his bitter songs are not unrelieved in their bitterness, especially as the years passed. And always the humour, already!

He did 'Famous blue raincoat' – how modulated and restrained a dramatic monologue that is! As good as or better than anything of Browning's. And strictly fitting the conventions of this form if my surmise is true that the poet is really the addressee. I think Leonard is more the 'thin gypsy thief' than the signatory but chose to occupy the quasi-innocent ('I never tried') point of the triangle as a merely titular 'L. Cohen'. In the flake of life at the source of this song more than just the famous blue raincoat was actually his. (You can see the very Burberry garment in the 1965 NFBC documentary 'Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Leonard Cohen'.) So I speculate. The full humanity of the addressor, his enemy the 'thin Gypsy thief', and '[his] woman', who ends as 'nobody's wife', are felt. How fully they are present. Compare that to 'Ballad of a thin man', 'Like a rolling stone', 'Idiot wind' (modified slightly by 'we' at the end) and others by Bob Dylan. They can be pretty funny but the sting is not taken out, the arrogance remains intact.

Respect – that is the state that structured the whole concert. Ours for him, his for us, his band's for him and each other and us, he for his band (and the mixer, the crew as well, who he doesn't fail to mention). And modesty. The modesty is so lightly beautiful because we know it is genuine, but also because he presents it with a dash of self-mockery, and mockery of those he is offering his humility to. "Your kindness knows no bounds" after we cheer wildly his childlike doodle on an electronic keyboard. A big sincere cheer during 'Hallelujah' at "I've told the truth, I didn't come to fool you". A half-celebratory, half-ironic cheer at the self-mocking 'I was born with the gift of a golden voice' during 'Tower of song'. It is his typical modesty, sometimes aching genuineness, more often humour, suspension of self-importance, which makes Leonard able to get away with addressing his love as his

'lady' without sounding either false or fey. (Another electric, burning exception is Dylan's 'Lay lady lay'.)

When he sings in 'So long Marianne':

'But you make me forget so very much

I forget to pray for the angels

And then the angels forget to pray for us'

He is offering the classical legitimisation of the egocentricity of the artist to justify what the non-artist knows he is bound to by remorse. But there is his humour again. He doesn't really accept the egocentricity, though he committed the acts, so he goes on:

'I see you've gone and changed your name again

And just when I've climbed this whole mountainside

To wash my eyelids in the rain'.

Though we accept that all the personal dramas in his songs are as much, well more, play scripts, rather than autobiography, we feel his own acuteness about his own brokenness. So he earned his humility in the university of his own mistakenness. And in his religious devotions. His performances now enact all that he has come to feel and understand about our weakness and preciousness. And also very specific forms of respect. He is enacting something like what Pope John Paul II acted out in his physical decline while remaining exposed in public – the holiness of the human form, in all its forms. So it is with Leonard. He offers up his age to be respected, his old man-hood, to be recognised as fully human, not lesser, not just because he has stories of when: "[he] was handsome, [he] was strong, [he] knew the words of every song". Not just for that, but for what he is right now, as he is right now, aching 'in the places where [he] used to play'. The self-mockery is self-respect. Wisdom, I think.

He has very often had female voices counterpointing his low, sometimes ragged, male sound. Female voices opened the concert – the 'la da la da la da la da...' refrain ('Dance me to the end of love'). So the chorus, the Webb sisters and Sharon Robinson, absolutely belonged there. And the female voice belongs within his music since his theme is the conversation of love, face to face, bodies present, connecting or disconnecting, human love in all its forms but especially in the penultimate form of lover

to lover (the ultimate being parent and child or, if you believe, that with God, though the latter never above the former – ‘the children who are asking to be born’). A concordance of Leonard’s work would find more occurrences of ‘naked’, ‘nakedness’, ‘beauty’, ‘the man’, ‘the woman’, ‘thee’, and ‘grace’ than in other songsmiths.

He improvised some of the lyrics, especially ‘Bird on a wire’. He did ‘The partisan’, which surprised me, in a rock version. He learnt it as a teenage leftist. I think it was for its rock-ability. But maybe he wanted to say resistance, with all its mistakes and disasters, must have its due. He introduced ‘Anthem’ (‘Ring the bells that still can ring’ - the chorus says it all as far as his moderate, restrained reactions and hopes go) with one of his lilting, poetic introductions, speaking of disorder and suffering in the world, as we play.

The thing that really was a downer for me was that he did ‘The Chelsea Hotel #2’. I thought he would have deleted that from his performing catalogue. I think in a documentary he spoke with remorse, I think shaking his head in wonder at himself, of how he could do so disrespectful and dismissive a song about Janis Joplin, one of the ‘died young’ in the tower of song. Worsened by ‘giving me head ... while the limousines waited below’ – that got a bawdy titter from some in the audience. It is a sorry comparison to put this song against Joe McDonald’s beautiful remembrance of his time with her in ‘Janis’ on Country Joe and the Fish’s ‘I-feel-like-I’m fixin’-to-die’ record. Or Kris Kristofferson’s heartfelt response when asked in an interview about the effect of Janis’ death on him. He broke off, unable to complete his words. As Leonard sang this song of boastfulness and spite I felt he would alter the last lines and drop ‘that’s all, I don’t think of you that often’, but all he did was add ‘little darling’. I suppose that was an attempt to soften it. Relatively speaking, we all think of Janis ‘often’, just as we do of any artist stitched into our life – like Leonard for example – at least when we hear their songs. He could at least have made a change like this:

‘I remember you well

In the Chelsea Hotel

I don’t think that you will be forgotten’

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## Wandering in our time - Looking forward with Leonard

### *Lover*

In 'So long Marianne' Leonard confesses:

'You left when I said that I was curious,

I never said that I was brave'

Being 'curious' was deemed essential, renewing his "neurotic affiliations" as he would say about criss-crossing from Hydra to North America, or, later, 'I'm crazy for love but I'm not coming on, I'm just paying my rent every day in the Tower of Song'. An exposure that generated art - the bohemian presumption. The downside of trying 'in my way to be free' ('Bird on a wire') being, as that song implies, that he may 'have been untrue' to himself as much as to others. Granted, complacency is a real enemy to art; to everything worthwhile. But there is such a thing as too much curiosity, as Leonard confesses in 'Came so far for beauty' (Recent Songs 1979). Some of his early songs suffer from a forced 'battle of the sexes' problematic, most evident on Songs of Love and Hate (1971), New Skin for the Old Ceremony (1974), and Death of a Ladies' Man (1977). The tone is quite different from the light and even sprightly defeatism of the love songs on Songs from a Room (1969). Even the dour 'You know who I am' offers a slim hope of 'repair'. The lowest point undoubtedly was reached in the black-hearted 'Is this what you wanted?' (1974), though most of the songs on Death of a Ladies' Man compete well with that. It is not that these songs are about nothing. Most of us have seen the meanness of a crumbling union, our own or that of others. So had Leonard by then and not just at his own behest. Failure in love is everywhere. So we have, to go with the Cohen corpus, 'Love hurts', 'You don't know what love is', 'River', 'Down to zero', 'God give me strength', 'What is this thing called love', 'Stardust', 'If you see her say hello', 'Willow weep for me', 'Boulder to Birmingham', 'Autumn leaves', 'Diamonds and rust', 'Ae fond kiss', 'Four strong winds', 'Good morning heartache', 'Die Liebe Farbe', 'Carrickfergus', 'Everybody's been burned', 'Yesterday' and some hundreds of other songs that capture experience (as against the hollow girl/boy group whines and plink, plink, plink piano ballads). Someone is left singing, for no one, '... a love that should have lasted years'. This is when they may hear "Nobody thought you two would ever split up!" from the witnesses.

Even so, millions have lived through 'to the end of love'. Leonard sings ('Hey, that's no way to say goodbye'):

'Many loved before us

I know that we are not new

It city and in forest

They smiled like me and you.'

These are those who are 'not looking for another' as they wander in their time, who can say in truth:

'You know my love goes with you

As your love stays with me,

It's just the way it changes

Like the shoreline and the sea'

The lovers' feeling for each other seems elemental. As if it always was as in Rodgers and Hart's 'Where or when' and always will be as in the Gershwins' 'Love is here to stay'. Enough so for somebody to serenade the inamorata in the public street. Somebody, not just anybody, for instance, me - 'Where or when' on a corner in a Blue Mountains township, 'Here to stay' in an inner urban shopping street.

Each feels as in McCartney's 'Here, there and everywhere'. Then they 'make a little history' every time they come together and 'burn their bridges down', as Nick Cave sings in 'The ship song'. When the passion and the continuance are both present it shines for others to see, a little lunar radiance from the solar energy between the couple. 'True love leaves [many] traces'. James Taylor captured it in 'Never die young'. We are or have been those people and when not we see them sitting close on the grass, head on shoulder on the lounge, coming arm in arm out of the theatre, holding hands in the street. Especially that. Holding hands. And with their children.

The L. Cohen in some early songs lived on extremely shaky ground:

'I lit a thin green candle to make your jealous of me,

But the room just filled up with mosquitoes,

They'd heard that my body was free'

There were some misbegotten pursuits and ruined prospects. Even so some fine songs resulted, 'Take this longing' (New Skin) for example. These and other experiences were reprised hilariously in songs like 'Master song', 'One of us cannot be wrong' (Songs of Leonard Cohen 1968), 'Memories' (Death of a Ladies' Man), 'I'm your man' (I'm Your Man 1988), and, much later, 'Anyhow' on Old Ideas (2012). That sequence alone displays the softening of bitterness and growth of self-insight, these serving to deepen not dilute the humour. The amusing, almost sleazy, cynicism of New Skin's 'Why don't you try?' ('I'm gonna wash that man right out of my hair' and 'Many a new day' for the new age) clatters against the songs of deep hurt like "Lover, lover, lover" (New skin), 'Coming back to you', 'Hallelujah' (Various Positions 1984), 'Waiting for the miracle' (The Future 1992), 'Humbled in love', 'Ain't no cure for love' (I'm Your Man), 'In my secret life' (Ten New Songs 2001), 'On the level' (You want it darker 2016) and especially 'The gypsy's wife' (Recent Songs), at least as good a pain-stroked portrait of loss and need as Dennis and Brent's 'Angel eyes'. That said, there was, alas, a making excuses element at times. Presumably this is why when he improvised in later performances on 'Bird on a wire' one alteration often was '... it's just that I thought a lover had to be some kind of liar too ...'. The darker versions of the 'problematic' in the earlier decades sometimes walk a thin line between an accurate account of the failures of love and an indulgent mourning of an impossibility that is as mythical as real.

What myth? What reality? There is hardly a hint of any Lawrentian notion of separately originated male and female spirits, so not that myth, nor even the reality of 'the maternal factor' though children make appearances. Rather we are in the zone, firstly, of physical embodiment and beauty. This is no myth. Nor is it a male preserve. Dull would s/he be of soul who has not felt intensity or been stilled in mute admiration in the presence of human beauty. But beauty, while sometimes absolute, is not necessarily revelatory. Youth is surely the glory of physical existence but sometimes its beauty speaks of youth alone and little else. So Leonard's songs of love work on two levels, as does love itself.

As to the physical realm - far from relying, say, on a dependent disposition of the female toward the male ('a ditch around a tower', 'Why don't you try?' New skin), the dynamic is more as in 'Blue alert', written with Anjani Thomas ('Her body's twenty stories high, you try to look away, you try but all you want to do is get there first'), or the self-satirical abjectness of 'I'm your man' – the desperate desire

of the male for beauty and erotic completion. Within the reality of this is the myth, the ploy, of a patriarchal iconography that, in the past, pulled off a surreptitious inversion that camouflaged the realities of disproportionate power and the real dependency of a woman on the presence of a father for her child and an economic base. (Which is not at all to say there was no real love back then, nor that forms of power and economics are minor now.) The naked and wilful inarticulacy of 'Women! Can't live with them, can't live without them!' is a contemporary survival. The man as victim when, even if he is the victim of a cruel upbringing, he is also his own victim via a determination to do anything other than examine his own actions. The self-induced humiliation of one who just will not stop and think. Rather than self-insight mayhem, suicide, and murder may be grasped.

Along with embodiment is the psychic-scape of love; the eroticism of fascinated, contending, and utterly unique selves negotiating the drama of "a sort of voltage of decorum discharged between two people approaching the crisis of human contact, and instinctive and mutual sensitivity to the boundary between them. Like a third presence." (Anne Carson Eros the bittersweet, Dalkey Archive Press, Dublin, 1998, p. 20). The slantwise stare, the melting gaze, limb-loosening, limb-dissolving. Here again enters myth; Romance, especially as conveyed in song. Romantic love has always had a presence (witness The Song of Songs) but, like democracy, its centrality as an ideal is only centuries old. It is not, though, just a cultural imposition, slavish. It operates at the most individual level as an aspect of agency, the mythical individualised and in a sui generis dance with the real. "Greatest certainty is felt about the beloved as the necessary complement to you. Your powers of imagination connive at this vision ... A gust of godlikeness may pass through you and for an instant a great many things look knowable, possible and present" (p. 36). When you are attracted to someone in an elemental, deeply-sourced way, the physical attributes become lineaments of the attraction. It is not solely vice versa. That is, it is not the attributes alone that shine out from them to you. Looks, be they glance or stare, are exchanged. In your eyes they shine with an attractiveness that is a reflection of your own magnetized soul-movement toward the person qua person, the whole person, making contact at a deeper level in their soul and drawing up from both founts a beatified physical presence. That specificity is best cradled in Rodgers and Hart's 'My funny valentine'. There are, shall we say, at least a million, there are millions! who could provide that mystery for you. Your chances of meeting them in a world of billions, when you walk around in circles of, at most, thousands, no hundreds, are slim. Chance adds to the mystery. This is an experience of aliveness like no other. The energising

impact of that forces a desire for more. Desire for more of this aliveness in a world of patterned activity, repetition, duty, and fading colours. For more of this intense intimacy with another being, when the mystery of others is so rarely and fleetingly offered or accepted. The aliveness and mystery is the lightning, the force. With the coup de foudre “a mood of knowledge floats over your life” (p. 153). Of this beginning “both good and evil, bitter and sweet, comes gratuitously and unpredictably”. “From that moment on the story is largely up to you, but the beginning is not” (p. 152).

Thenceforward you have to make the mood of knowledge into actual knowledge if you want to grasp the something else, something the afterglow of lovemaking incarnates. The wish for stillness, peace, or rest. To not just be rocked by it but to have continuance. To get there you have to get beyond delusion, connivance, confusion, evasion, embarrassment, jealousy, suspicion, disgust, faint-heartedness, failure, disgrace. In a 2001 interview with Stina Dabrowski Leonard said love is ‘overlooking’. You have to forget about most things. He then read his poem ‘The sweetest little song’ - “You go your way, And I’ll go your way too.” Leonard said “I think that is the kernel of a love poem”. That requires confession, thought, compromise and forgiveness. Otherwise we really do pretend to the divine and get lost in a fog of solipsism which can grow our elemental narcissism into something of impunity, presumption, withdrawal and coldness. From the lessons of fragility come the flexible, the considered, the impunitive, the open and warm-hearted. This is ‘When hatred with his package comes, you forbid delivery’ (‘You have loved enough’ Ten New Songs).

All this is Leonard’s soul-scape. It is a region most of us have occupied. Those who never do are to be doubly pitied. Something in themselves remains undiscovered in the failure to attempt the discovery of another. In this aspect the love songs are those of adults striving, more or less genuinely, for communicative and equal relationships. As well, songs like ‘Winter lady’ (Songs of Leonard Cohen), ‘The smokey life’ (Recent Songs), and ‘Travelling light’ (You want it darker) of people accepting and dignifying the transient, or songs that admit failure in that, like ‘The stranger song’ (Songs of Leonard Cohen).

Jian Ghomeshi (The Guardian 10/7/09) asked Leonard “Have the women in your life been a source of your strength or weakness?” (The article was an edited version of a Q TV ‘CBC exclusive’ interview of April that year available on YouTube.) Leonard replied:

“It's not a level playing ground for either of us, for either the man or the woman. This is the most challenging activity that humans get into, which is love. You know, where we have the sense that we can't live without love. That life has very little meaning without love. So we're invited into this arena which is a very dangerous arena, where the possibilities of humiliation and failure are ample. So there's no fixed lesson that one can learn, because the heart is always opening and closing, it's always softening and hardening. We're always experiencing joy or sadness. But there are lots of people who've closed down. And there are times in one's life when one has to close down just to regroup.”

Leonard always eventually ‘told the truth’. *We know* he ‘didn't come to fool you’, hence the audience's cheers. His ledger of debt he clears in ‘Hallelujah’ - ‘I did my best, it wasn't much, I couldn't feel, so I tried to touch’; and on *You Want it Darker* in ‘Treaty’ - ‘I'm so sorry for the ghost I made you be, only one of us was real – and that was me.’ Also in ‘Leaving the table’ - ‘I struggled with some demons, They were middle-class and tame’. In an earlier interview by Stina Dabrowski (this one in 1997 at Leonard's Zen teacher Roshi's Mt. Baldy centre) he said “I had wonderful love but I did not give back wonderful love. There were people who loved me very, very deeply, and very genuinely and I was unable to reply to their love. ... Because I was obsessed with some fictional sense of separation ... I couldn't reach and touch the thing that was being offered me”. Deep honesty dissolves myths.

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### *The alloyed*

For Leonard the main undercurrents seemed to have been a familial shroud of depressiveness, and an inability to resist beauty and erotic charisma, availing himself of a fair degree of charisma of his own, caught so finely in Joni Mitchell's ‘A case of you’ (her ‘Bewitched, bothered and bewildered’ - ‘After one whole quart of brandy ... I don't even shake’). Leonard didn't only go on to experience ‘mosquitoes’. He knew the passionate beginning that promises continuance; as in the song ‘Half the perfect world’, written with Anjani Thomas, which paints that experience wherein you seem to live ‘a thousand years in one’:

‘On that fundamental ground

Where love's unwilling, unleashed, unbound

And half the perfect world is found.'

Part of the problem may have been an addiction to such beginnings. Jane Siberry's 'Love is everything' is a complete portrayal of a love begun as above but denied its completion, in this case because, as she sings, 'You're chickening out aren't you'. She asks all the questions that can be asked including 'Maybe it was to learn how to love'. Leonard broke hearts again and again and he experienced betrayal and had his heart broken. You only need one such experience to begin to learn. It is not to be regretted. As R.E.M. sang 'Everybody hurts sometimes ... Hold on'. Hold on because thereafter a bit of religion or philosophy, or a handy wise one, is all else that is requisite to go on to become a decent version of a human being. Not so easy if you have never had your heart broken. Leonard certainly attained decency. As to those exchanges of charisma - in the end he finally sang 'The wretched beast is tame' ('Leaving the table', [You Want it Darker](#)).

Leonard was far from being 'just a boudoir poet' as Joni Mitchell once said. In popular song he is unique, or, at least, rare, in blending the intimate, the public, and the religious into a whole, fractured within and between each, but still seeking somehow to be consonant. This is partly poetic habit. He often uses the lineaments of one to symbolise elements of the other, as do some Farsi and Arabic poets. Songs like 'The window' and 'The guests' (both on [Recent Songs](#)) seem loosely inspired by Rumi. Later, Psalm 137 was a template for 'By the rivers dark' (on [Ten New Songs](#)):

'And he gave the wind

My wedding ring:

And he circled us

With everything.'

He also gave us celebrations of the body and sensual life - from the male viewpoint (the limbs and clothing of women). Though not an unalloyed celebration as in the [The Song of Songs](#) and [The Rubaiyat](#) of Omar Khayyam. In an interview (Terry Gross NPR 'Fresh air' 27/5/06) he described hearing 'What a wonderful world' sung by Louis Armstrong and thinking to himself "Why don't I leave a couple of songs like that behind me?", but concluded it was not how his soul swung. Given that we are heading into a maelstrom heavier than that of the mid-twentieth century, as Leonard increasingly

divined, the alloyed celebrations of 'Anthem' and 'Hallelujah' are bound to be of more use. Anyway, he did give us 'Come healing' (Old Ideas), 'Dance me to the end of love', and 'If it be your will' (Various Positions), surely enough to earn our gratitude. An interviewer once asked him if there was a song he wished he had written (Sylvie Simmons, I'm your man: the life of Leonard Cohen Vintage, London, 2012/2017, p. 322). He replied: "Yes. 'If it be your will'. And I wrote it."

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### *An appetite for prayer*

After many years of effort on the religious front Leonard concluded he had a natural inability for it (2001 interview with Stina Dabrowski), whilst having "an appetite for prayer" (the latter repeated in several interviews such as that of 2006 in Montreal with Helle Vaagland of Norwegian public broadcaster NRK). This seems good enough. The irreducibility of religion is made of many elements; social, historical, cultural, psychological and so forth, apart from the transcendent, if such there be. But it is founded in our need for gratitude, awe, and surrender, needs deeply dwelling and deeply beneficent, no matter how secular we like to be. In the 2009 interview with Jian Ghomeshi Leonard said "The central activity of my days and nights was dealing with a prevailing sense of anxiety, anguish, distress. A background of anguish that prevailed." So he persevered with Zen and, increasingly, by completing his Jewish inheritance (Sylvie Simmons, p. 438ff.). It is the latter that was to be final in his explorations and which resonates most purposefully for us as we are 'standing on a ledge' not unlike that our ancestors trembled upon in the 1930s.

In despair of Zen practices releasing him from the depressive cloud Leonard ran away to Mumbai to a Hindu teacher. He returned several times. In at least one interview during that period (e.g. with Dabrowski in 2001) Leonard presented an element of the ur-philosophy of Hinduism – the non-existence of self (which transferred into the main schools of Buddhism). It is at least arguable that this belief did not survive the trip through Chan Buddhism in China to Zen in Japan (though techniques to defeat the ego certainly did). I suspect it did not survive long for Leonard either.

Then there is the not unrelated Hindu/Buddhist doctrine of non-attachment. In the end the depressive madness that drove Leonard to multiple drugs, Scientology (it was *he* who went 'clear'), and gallons

of alcohol in the early days just burned itself out when he was in India trying that new religious angle. He began to speak of a 'relaxation'. In the account of this in Sylvie Simmons' biography the impression is given that this was as much a matter of coincidence as of doctrinal revelation (pp. 396ff.). That Leonard repeatedly failed to remain exclusively attached in love does not discount the passionate humanity which kept him connecting with people. He did so in a way that people loved to partake of. Though Leonard often implied he was adept at 'the con', some elegant mix of conviviality, humour, freely-given admiration, earnestness, warmth, and a not-exclusively-sexual erotic ambience (Eros as aliveness) prevailed. He was no candidate for non-attachment. Even his Zen seems to have been as much a function of love of Roshi as spirituality (that, at least, was one of his stock answers). Leonard's self was no more a 'con' than such as goes with all our negotiations of the human terrain and, indeed, our own internal dialogue. Neither implies non-existence. What is more, the neuroscientific jury is hung on this question.

In his Prince of the Asturias award speech (2011) Leonard spoke of "a self that is not fixed, a self that struggles for its own existence". One of his stock answers from early interviews on was along these lines: "It's in your work that you locate your self-respect, it's in your work that you refine your character, it's in your work that you filter the world and try to set it in order" (this version from a 1988 Canadian TV interview). He sometimes described the diminishing circle of hopes/effectiveness/alternatives/delusion in life and the need to adopt a willingness toward the work that remains to one, what is leftover, and to take up one's *métier* with seriousness. In remarks for a 1992 book on song writing (quoted on the web, e.g. Scott Myers 10/11/12) that remind me of recent commentary about 'bullshit jobs' he talked about our need for employment and of 'unemployment' everywhere, including amongst the employed, and especially amongst the most 'gainfully' employed. It is in this context that I think his thoughts about self sit best. It is in our seriousness about life and the taking up of our responsibilities that we make ourselves. 'Inner feelings come and go' ('That don't make it junk' Ten New Songs). Our work is ours. Leonard kept at his work until the end.

(Regarding Leonard's interviews: tiresome, surely, to be repeatedly asked the same questions, or at least, to detect the same indecent intrusiveness, especially about his time with Marianne; but Leonard responded with a light and graceful poise dusted with that self-mockery that enabled him to deliver more or less stock answers in a way that roused no rancour.)

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*Here it is*

He gradually took on the task of preparing a 'manual for living with defeat' ('Going home', Old Ideas. The phrase was previously used in a poem on which the song was based.) In a 2014 London interview (at the time of the release of Popular Problems) he said a 'manual' would be "first of all an acknowledgement of the fact that everyone suffers, that everyone is engaged in a mighty struggle for self-respect, for meaning, for significance. I think the first step would be to recognise that your struggle is the same as everyone else's struggle, and that your suffering is the same as everyone else's suffering. I think that's the beginning of a responsible life. Otherwise we are in a continual battle, a savage battle with each other, unless we recognise that each of us suffers in the same way there is no possible solution, political or social or spiritual, so that would be the beginning, the recognition that we all suffer." He was aware of Simone Weil's remark that the only suitable greeting between us should be "What are you going through?"

The religious side asserted an increasing presence, especially from Various Positions onwards, of the explicitly Hebraic influences and forms (Simmons, pp. 314-5). This reached its apotheosis in You Want it Darker, appropriately his last record. With this thread he wove a less indirect statement of the nature of the human condition than the sometimes evasive, or playful, earlier statements. His recognition of our frailty, absurdity, and preciousness was present from the beginning. Witness 'Sisters of mercy' and 'Suzanne' (1968), or 'Who by fire' (1974). But he increasingly stitched it with the thread of the inescapable omnipresence of death and omniscience of brokenness, reaching its finest point in Ten New Songs of 2001, co-composed with Sharon Robinson. (More of Leonard's songs are co-authored than people seem to notice.)

He wanted us to discern 'the Masterpiece' from 'Boogie Street' ('A thousand kisses deep', Ten New Songs):

You win a while, and then it's done –

Your little winning streak.

And summoned now to deal,

With your invincible defeat,

You live your life as if it's real,

A Thousand Kisses Deep ...

You lose your grip, and then you slip

Into the Masterpiece.'

He did not think that we are 'running the show', not as we conceive it at least (2001 interview with Stina Dabrowski). That we do is one of the myths we live by in 'Boogie Street' (elsewhere 'Babylon'), the locale of all our self-important dashing about and of our craven seeking of distraction. The most driven, the most seemingly self-directed, often know the least, even about themselves; *especially* about themselves. Living your life 'a thousand kisses deep' is to do so with "the intuitive understanding of the fundamental mystery", 'the Masterpiece'. He means receptivity, being, the non-materialistic, non-having mode in life, the aspect that is pushed away by much that we are obliged to do, and much that we only presume we are obliged to do. Our culture has inculcated in us a perverse assumption of control, even as things increasingly 'slide in all directions' ('The future', The Future). A lot of us rush through our lives wearing blinkers and never stop to experience mere presence: "... if you can relax in that, or if you can touch it, or if it asserts itself from time to time, then the invincible defeat is transcended". (Both quotes found in Allan Shoalwater's 'Lessons from Leonard Cohen' web series but I cannot verify his source in a Maclean's interview). But it is not supernal. I think his point is it happens *within* the quotidian. That, at least, is the Zen take on it. We may not 'run the show' but we cannot live outside it. We have to make choices, or what seem to be choices, no matter how narrowly they are presented to us. (This is why 'transcendence' is the wrong concept.) We expend our diamond at the pawn shop but 'That don't make it junk' (Ten new songs). We remain responsible: to create a space for perception and responsiveness. To be human. As he sang in 'Heart with no companion' (Various Positions):

'Through the days of shame that are coming

Through the nights of wild distress

Tho' your promise count for nothing

You must keep in nonetheless.'

A renowned 1988 book, The Altruistic Personality by Samuel and Pearl Oliner, is based on interviews with over 700 rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust. They were asked how they kept on, in the face of enormous risk not excluding execution or being sent to the camps themselves. In brief, the common thread from their answers were words like "I am a human", "What else would I do?", "What choice was there?"

In another interview Leonard said: "This world is full of conflicts and ... things that cannot be reconciled, but there are moments when we can transcend the dualistic system and reconcile and embrace the whole mess ... Regardless of what the impossibility of the situation is, there is a moment when you open your mouth and you throw out your arms ... and you just say 'Hallelujah! Blessed is the name'". (Simmons, pp. 319ff.) His song 'Hallelujah' reputedly had many dozens of verses. He sometimes sang alternate endings. Bearing in mind the above I think the second of these two endings is somewhat truer to these thoughts:

'It's not somebody who's seen the light

It's a cold and it's a broken

Hallelujah'

'Even though it all went wrong

I'll stand before the Lord of Song

With nothing on my tongue but

Hallelujah'

'Here it is' (Ten New Songs) is another way of saying it:

'Here is your crown

And your seal and your rings;

And here is your love

For all things. ...

Here is your sickness.

Your bed and your pan;

And here is your love  
For the woman, the man.  
May everyone live,  
And may everyone die,  
Hello, my love,  
And my love, Goodbye.'

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### *The order of the soul*

Leonard did not always need a satirical twist to be political or to do 'social commentary', as they used to say. He did not always have to preserve his distance. Songs like 'The stories of the street' ([Songs of Leonard Cohen](#)), 'Story of Isaac' ([Songs from a Room](#)), 'Democracy' ([The Future](#)) and 'The land of plenty' ([Ten New Songs](#)) are earnest and pretty direct. Even 'Everybody knows' ([I'm Your Man](#)) is bare truth within the black humour. He accepted that "If you affirm the life of the heart, there's going to be elements in society all the time that do not affirm the life of the heart. So you're going to find yourself pegged or described as a protest singer". He did, however, resist being drawn into the "tyranny of posture". He said "Everybody feels that they have been wronged, everybody has become an injustice collector, everybody wants their situation to be corrected as deliciously and as viciously as possible". (Both from a WXRK radio interview with Kate and Vin Scelsa after the release of [The Future](#) 13/6/93, uploaded to the web following his death.)

His political satire is at many removes from specificity of time and place, thus making it sharper, more elemental, like the political implications in a Shakespeare play. But not placed in a past. Very much placed now, or occasionally looking to a scary future. His satire, unlike much of his work, is unrestrained. It's the hyperbole that makes it satirical. I remember in my thirties or thereabouts, if I walked past a TV, or otherwise heard evidence of a 'low, dishonest decade' (that's Auden not Leonard), I would say "revolting creatures!", and the disgrace of it all would wash off me and I was free, though still locked in conflict with such dissembling fiends. I think there is a little in these songs from Leonard of "revolting creatures!" Sometimes the persona of the song is such a fiend as in 'First we take Manhattan' ([I'm Your Man](#)), though they are still allowed their apologia - 'I don't like what

happened to my sister'. In the 1993 WXRK interview he said "The rational positions were losing a sense of justification ... all the energy, all the fun, was going to the edges. So you are in a period now where the extremist position, the oversimplified position, is the one that captures hearts today."

Leonard's reactions to left and right paranoia, and the militant blindness of ideology and fundamentalism, proved prescient when The Future was released just prior to the first World Trade Centre attack. Sometimes disrespect is the best tool, in order to remain free and preserve a zone of respect in your personal life. Hannah Arendt said that laughter is a form of sovereignty.

But also, I hope, still to resist with civility and care, to be ready with self-mockery as Leonard always was, recognising the humanity that is held in common and the flaws too, especially those of male pride, the ur-masculine imperative – men always have something to prove. The perpetrators, the victimizers, the self-acquitted, the dead heroes and the self-lacerated cowards are countless at that altar. In 'The butcher' (Songs from a room) Leonard gives a 'just so' gesture, but he certainly nails it in 'Story of Isaac':

'Have mercy on our uniforms

Man of peace or man of war

The peacock spreads his fan.'

Leonard knew, though, that he had never stepped up. In 'Land of plenty' (Ten New Songs) he begins:

'Don't really have the courage

To stand where I must stand.

Don't really have the temperament

To lend a helping hand.'

And he didn't. For example, as far as I have seen, despite or because of his house on Hydra, he never spoke out against the Greek colonels, though a world-wide political and artistic community did.

Entering upon action means you will have enemies you would like to defeat. Defeating them, though, is less about hatred and more about dismissal while your energies go toward joining others in building an alternative. A notebook excerpt in Old Ideas reads "Speak truth to power? Rather, speak truth to the powerless". Otherwise it is about violence. Leonard was never a pacifist and was subject to boyish

fantasies of soldiering, which he mocks in 'Field Commander Cohen' (New skin) and 'The Captain' (Various positions), and questions in 'The old revolution' (Songs from a room). Hence his hapless excursion to Cuba and his more effective time in Israel during war. Understandably, as a Jew, he remained under the shadow of Nazism, World War Two, armed resistance, and the Holocaust. As do we all. This is the landscape behind 'You want it darker' (echoing Auden's 'The shield of Achilles'):

'A million candles burning

For the help that never came ...

They're lining up the prisoners

The guards are taking aim'

In various places it is clear he expected it would all come down to violence. He didn't 'pretend to understand at all' the Sermon on the Mount ('Democracy' The Future). 'Sounded like the truth, but it's not the truth today' ('It seemed the better way' You Want it Darker). He may be right. There is no telling, though strong indications from history, as to what will happen in environmentally-induced collapse. It all tends to resolve back to something he well knew. We are fated to moral choice and action whatever the prospects – 'though your promise count for nothing, you must keep it nonetheless'. That is why he felt the need to apologise for abstention. Leonard was too remote from action, however, to be a reliable judge of the available modes. Non-violent direct action is the ruling mode now and research on 627 movements from 1900 to now demonstrates that it has been the most successful mode (see the work of Erica Chenoweth, Deva Woodly and others).

Whatever the blind spots, Leonard was committed to giving an account of power, social cruelty, and, indifference ('getting lost in that hopeless little screen', 'Democracy'). In 'Anthem' he sings:

'But they've summoned up

a thundercloud

and they're going to hear from me'

In 'The future' (The Future) he implies something worse is coming, something so bad that he jokes:

'Give me back the Berlin Wall

give me Stalin and St. Paul

I've seen the future, brother:

it is murder.'

There is an awareness of the peril of human society unconscious and forgetful of justice. In that song he sings:

'Things are going to slide in all directions

Won't be nothing

Nothing you can measure anymore

The blizzard of the world

Has crossed the threshold

And it has overturned

The order of the soul.'

The chorus responds 'When they said REPENT I wonder what they meant'. Leonard answers in 'You want it darker' in the vein of the penitential psalms. There we find that repentance is about making it darker, that is, as in Psalm 51, opening a contrite and broken heart, preparing a readiness for fundamental remorse; only those being the basis for a capacity to change and an ability to be washed clean and renew the order of the soul and the bonds toward others. Only then can you say 'Hineni, I am ready lord'.

In the 1993 WXRK interview he was asked "What to do?". "The advice I give especially when young people ask me what to do is 'Duck!'" Later Leonard was made aware by Catherine Ingram, a Buddhist and global warming activist, of what 'everybody knows' now. She had reached a point so many, like falling dominoes, have now reached; a despairing realisation that even if serious action takes off tomorrow, climate disasters and associated socio-economic collapses are already baked-into the global system. She rehearsed the dilemma with him - to tell people or let them live in hope? Leonard gave what, now at least, is the wrong answer, given that reality is crashing in no matter what is said or not said: "There are things we don't tell the children", the 'children' being us, the 'adults'. Leonard sang in 'The stories of the street' ([Songs of Leonard Cohen](#)):

'O lady with your legs so fine,

O stranger at your wheel,  
You are locked into your suffering,  
And your pleasures are the seal.'

We have made our children, our grandchildren, and those 'asking to be born', slaves to our greed. In the darkness of our unconscious lurks fear that our pleasures will have to be surrendered, willingly or unwillingly. But doesn't everybody know? I think so, though for many it is a successfully suppressed knowing.

Since songs like 'The Future', 'Everybody knows' and others *do* tell 'the children' perhaps Leonard thought, either way they are not listening? So did he think that no amount of telling, blackly humorous or frank and factual, would alter the status quo and that change now will only come of disaster, by force of circumstance? That no miracle will make 'the lights in the land of plenty ... shine on the truth one day' (Ten New Songs), that the fragile confidence of 'Democracy' (The Future) is forlorn?

The prophets in the holy books offered their obedience to God – Hineni, I am ready Lord! We owe our obedience to our children. In the 'Story of Isaac' (Songs of Leonard Cohen) Leonard sang:

'You who build the altars now to sacrifice these children

You must not do it anymore.

A scheme is not a vision

You never have been tempted by a demon or a god.'

In Sylvie Simmons' biography (p.509) she records: "That "hineni", Leonard explained, 'that declaration of readiness no matter what the outcome, that's part of everyone's soul. We are all motivated by deep impulses and deep appetites to serve, even though we may not be able to locate that which we are willing to serve. So, so this is just a part of my nature, and I think of everybody else's nature, to offer oneself at the critical moment when the emergency becomes articulate. It's only when the emergency becomes articulate that we can locate that willingness to serve."

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## The morning after 6<sup>th</sup> November 2010 - part II

With the mostly implied rather than stated references of the satirical songs, and with the more important positive statements and honouring of humanity, even in failure and betrayal in love, and honouring the human form divine too, I can't help feel the frame of reference of 20th century horror and disaster. There is no direct reference perhaps but I can't help sensing the devastation of the world happening while he grew in a family that had migrated away from pogrom. I recall his boyhood politics was orthodox leftism of the pre-sixties. Anyway, he could not fail to be aware.

I think the Old Testament landscape in some of his songs is some kind of counterpoint with the 20th century's horror. It is explicit in songs like 'Story of Isaac' (which he didn't do) but that is not so much what I am thinking of. I think he is portraying life silhouetted against, or, better, within, a strong presence of a powerful moral world, that we live our life in choices, and many roads taken are slippery slopes to personal isolation or social decay. 'There's a Law, there's an Arm, there's a Hand' (Various Positions). When he said "your kindness knows no bounds" behind the joke was the real presence of kindness, and therefore of 'man-unkind' (e e cummings). When he offers his respect to the musicians and praises them to us, when he responds feelingly to our praise, I can't help feeling an allusive and elusive portrayal of a world in which love, modest and grand, is the frail lattice on which everything hangs. 'And here is the love that it's built upon.' ('Here it is' Ten New Songs).

The musicians were more than professional, impeccable, and virtuosic. They were passionately there. The chorus in their movement and restraint were like a beating heart. All the musicians were full of attention to the joint project (apart from a few little ego trips from Dino Soldo the multi-instrumentalist wind man – but that was taken in good part; he was partly just joking anyway). Neil Larsen on keyboards, apart from his solid rhythmic work and solos, also played the Hammond B without once venturing upon one of its irritating sixties' modes. One of Bob Metzger's guitar solos had all the power of Jimi in his lyrical modes. We could have had a little more from the Celtic harp. But Javier Mas on 12 string and Spanish mandolins was irreplaceable - more so than anything else. The musical director Roscoe Beck on bass played some flourishes like a soloist. The drummer Rafael Gayol did what he had to do with polish but also shone with good humour. The audience remained focussed, rapt, applauding wildly at every opportunity, even applauding solos as if at a jazz show, offering whistles,

shouts, halloes, jokes, comments, and praise. They responded to almost every change and subtlety in the music, to almost every joke in the lyrics, and all in the patter, and to the double-entendres. The main thing was the warmth of the audience. It was a form of love so it ramified the themes of Leonard's work. People love to love, love to praise, love to applaud, love to be generous, love to see artistry in fond cooperation. It is like acting out an impossibility - of how all relations and life should be - a living momentary utopia. Somewhere I read that old Tolkien said of his created worlds (created so that they seem to be remembered) that when the peasant doffs his cap to the lord it does them both good. Well, the hierarchical structures are long gone, so it is safe to think of that in the dynamic performance context. Respect, again respect.

For me there were a couple of surprises. He did not do, 'Hey that's no way to say goodbye' so very lovely a song. He did do 'So long Marianne' but left off the lovely verses at the end:

'I'm standing on a ledge

And your fine spider web is fastening my ankle to a stone'

Well, work like Leonard's is just such a tenuous fastening for us.

Like you all said about Leonard last year – this was the best or one of the best concerts of my life.

The finish played out all I have said about warmth and consideration, he for audience and we for him.

We were on our feet at the second he placed the microphone respectfully on the stage and danced off. They gave a few encore songs willingly, then after a bit longer applause, were there again. But the cheering was never of that greedy, stamping kind you sometimes get. Then he used 'Closing time' and some gentle words to close for real. We applauded them out in a way indicating we were done, we were happy. That surely was the way to say goodbye.

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