

THE VALUE OF POURING A CUP FOR AN UNSEEN FRIEND

Article by Steve Kokker

In the last issue, I wrote about the joys of drinking tea outside, in Nature. Recently, when I re-read it to post it on our teashop's website, it inspired me to take advantage of what I knew might be among the last sunny, warm-ish days left of the year. It was a calm, sunny autumn Saturday afternoon and I packed up my tea gear and headed to my nearby forest-backed beach for a session among the pine and birch trees.

I spent about an hour drinking a braided Yiwu sheng Puerh from 2008, eyes closed in the sun, trying to practice some non-obvious tantric yoga breathing exercises without arousing too much suspicion to passing dog-walkers or mushroom hunters. I had my own swath of forest floor; no one came anywhere near. For a few blissful moments of no-thought I managed to approach feeling like a field of awareness, just taking in the curves and bends of the surrounding trees, the billowing patches of browning grass, all with a minimum of mental noise.

I was definitely happy to be alone. Besides just sitting and being, there were a few questions I wanted to ponder, and in short order, after just a few bowls, all felt in balance. Yet while I didn't particularly wish for company, I watched my mind calling up specific friends and wishing they'd be able to pop in for just a bowl or two.

But how to make people just suddenly appear, without having Samantha's *Bewitched* powers?

Somehow, my mind wandered to some film I saw long ago in which a therapist suggested to his client that if she wanted to 'find someone', she'd have to first make room for him. Too often we complain or fret about wanting this or that, he or she, but change absolutely nothing in our habits or actions to make room for this. The therapist suggested she set an extra place at her dinner table every night in her solitary apartment, as if expecting someone... and get used to this feeling, to this image of someone already by her side.

I realized that I had for some reason packed two bowls that day, and wasn't sure why, for a solo session. But I had deliberately packed and carried a second bowl with me and there it lay empty. Hmm. I thought, in my sun-drenched, hazy kind of way. What if I poured tea in there and set it out in front of me? If I found myself even partially wanting company, why not do something about it? For a moment I had an image of a fantasy-come-true striding by and seeing a full cup of tea, then saddling down for a sip and flirt.

I poured the tea, set the bowl in front of me and went back to flipping through the *Art of Tea*





magazine, closing my eyes again when the sun pierced through the clouds.

No more than five minutes after I'd set out the second bowl, I heard some rustlings nearby, getting closer. No one had so far come anywhere near me so the sounds were distinct, crisp. I thought, "Already? Wow, that *The Secret* stuff really works!" and turned around. The large, disheveled figure of a broken man was standing a few meters away from me; large, sad, clownish eyes hanging over unshaven jowls. Clothes ratty, stained, oversized. People might refer to him as a bum, a drunk.

"Ex-excuse me," he faltered in Russian, "I don't mean to disturb your peace, but..." He stopped, looked around, placed a finger on his chin, frowned and looked back at me. Stilted head movements, very likely from intoxication. "...You—you wouldn't want some company?" he asked.

I found myself slip into automatic mode, that same kind of Big City Mode that wants to immediately say, "No!", when approached to give money or answer a questionnaire: "Ah, no, no thanks," I said, listening to my superficial self which told me that I did *not* want to talk to *this* person. With a tilt of his head, he softly held out an exposed palm as if to say, "Hey cool, no worries, I understand." Almost comically, he raised his eyebrows as he turned to leave.

I instantly felt terrible. Here I'd called out to the Universe to send me some company, and it seemed to listen to me, albeit not to my unspoken fantasies, and I immediately rejected the offer. An inner 'grrrr', then an inner softening. "But hey," I called as he was just a few meters' shuffle from me, "would you like a sip of tea?" and held out the second bowl with still-warm tea towards him.

He turned around and his face lit up for a second. He chuckled. "Tea," he repeated, almost sardonically, and walked back towards me. He leaned down and took the bowl and brought it to his lips, standing towering above me. I could see more clearly now that his clothes were indeed quite dirty, like the tattered plastic bag he carried. He set the bag and a large bottle of Coca Cola down in order to hold the bowl with both hands. As Wu De often says about drinking bowl tea, it forces people to put down their worldly concerns in order to focus on tea.

"Taste good?" I asked. He paused in that universally-understood polite way which indicated that he was searching for a diplomatic way to say otherwise. "It needs getting used to," he said with a smile. "Yeah, this tea we don't drink for the taste but more for how it makes us feel." He looked at me sharply. "Exactly," he said, "I know *exactly* what you mean."

He told me that he had noticed me sitting there so peacefully, drinking tea in the forest, that he'd never seen such a thing and felt compelled to come over, to maybe ask something about Eastern philosophy.

"What's that you're reading," he asked, pointing to *Art of Tea*. I flipped some pages for him to see, "It's a magazine about tea and tea culture." He started laughing and said, "You're reading about tea! You don't need to *read* about tea, you need to *drink* tea! Reading about tea, imagine! Drink tea, just drink tea!" And now we both laughed. "You're completely right," I said and motioned him to sit down on the grass near me.

He was overweight but sat down cross-legged easily enough. His brown woolen hat was greasy, his brown pants had large stains on them; his brown jacket showed signs of having spent time on grass and dirt, and his breath, even at this distance, was sharply redolent of alcohol. Yet his blue eyes were sharp, clear and moved to and fro observantly. They were large, slightly bulging and very expressive, like a Marty Feldman in training. They also got moist pretty quickly.

"I'm a drunk," he said, shrugging his shoulders.

"Okay." I merely looked at him.

He paused. "I so want to just leave this world, stop it all. End everything. I just – want to finish with it all." I allowed a silence.

He continued. "I... I tried yesterday..." Here he made a slicing motion at his throat, "...but it didn't work out; it didn't work out." He sighed. "I don't know!"

"Do you think that's the best thing to do? I think maybe it is not your time yet."

"But why not?" He blinked heavily and a large tear came rolling down his cheek. "I have nothing left. I had a family once. They... they killed my wife. There's ... nothing."

"That's rough," I said after a pause, and he hung his head lower and closed his eyes for a moment before raising his head again. Several more tears ran down his face.

"There's nothing left for me to do. I don't see why I should bother to live."

I wondered what I could possibly say of assistance to someone I knew nothing about and what either soothing words or practical solutions I might come up with. I thought for a moment and what came into my head was the thought, "If only he could help someone." I didn't know what that meant, but found myself thinking of a nearby social center which takes in homeless and troubled people daytime and offers minimal assistance. I didn't imagine him going there *for* help necessarily, but *to* help. Helping someone else (even though the term is a loaded one), has a magical way of imparting a sense of meaning to life. I found myself

telling him about this center and where it's located. He cut me off—

"Ah, I don't want to get any help!"

"No no, I mean, maybe they need *your* help. They serve meals and organize events and whatnot, and maybe you could help them out."

He looked at me. "Me help? Kind of a volunteer thing?"

"Yes! Who knows, they may need assistance and you might like the feeling of helping others."

He paused, raised his eyebrows, "That's a thought." After another pause, a frown, "But how could I help anyone? I can't give them money or anything."

A slim, middle-aged woman walked past us nearby with her fluffy little white dog. I saw him leering in that direction, suddenly a big smile on his face. I turned to see what he was staring at. "Cute dog, right?" I asked with a smile. He flashed a look of disappointment. "What dog!?! Who cares about the dog!" He craned his neck to watch the woman's disappearing figure.

"Hey," I said, "*help* is too big a word. Sometimes just talking to someone can make them feel good, sitting down for a chat, even that can be a little help. You can do that, make someone feel a bit better?"

He considered this. He looked up and pointed to a forlorn older female figure sitting on a wood stump in the near distance. "You think I could help her?"

"Who knows? Maybe she won't want to talk. But someone will. And sometimes just a little contact is all someone wants, it doesn't need to be anything more."

We chatted hopefully about this for a few moments. At some point he got silent again, said that he once had a family, a job. He reached inside his bag. "I need a drink, I know it's shameful, but forgive me, I need it." He pulled out a plastic bottle of a bright red liquid. He called it "eau-de-cologne". The kind of poison they still sell at roadside kiosks here: Perfumed water itinerants drink for a cheap buzz. He took a swig. I poured more tea into his bowl.

"I saw you sitting here in the forest," he started, "so..." He waved a hand in front of him in the air making vague motions. "So... peaceful. Beautiful!" He smacked his lips and kissed his fingers. "I've never seen anything like that. I knew I just wanted to come over, even if I was disturbing your harmony. Drinking tea in the forest! Imagine!"

He asked me to enlighten him about Eastern culture. I told him I am no expert, but I am trying to live a life of a tea, in which we drink tea not just for the pleasant tastes or health benefits but for the dedication it requires of us to serve tea properly, for the focus and concentration it brings to our lives, for the appreciation it fosters in us for the small details of life, for the con-



nection with Nature it offers. And that's why the taste of tea is not the most important aspect for us.

He still liked the idea of drinking tea for how it makes us feel. "I know I am poisoning my body with drinking, but I can't help it."

He finished his second bowl of tea and we continued chatting in the sun for a while. I tried to remain unattached to the results of our dialogue (in that trying not to force him to go to this center, trying not to feel that this exchange of ours must lead to something monumental and positive) and just tried to be with him. Eventually, he decided to go over to another woman sitting on another bench and see if she wanted some company, and I decided to leave. We shook hands and both acknowledged what a pleasure it had been. "It's the first time I've ever had such an encounter!" he said.

"It's always a first time," I said, and motioned to that lady in the distance. "See if she needs cheering up." We smiled, and that was that...

***Postscript:** I'm getting into the habit of pouring a second cup during solo sessions—either to share with someone I already know and love or for someone I have yet to love. I'm also trying to keep the passenger seat in the car uncluttered, the other half of my bed not a clothes way-station between body and washing machine, the living room couch clear enough for others, and a space around the heart wide enough to accommodate that which is gifted to me with outstretched hands. Thanks, Tea, once again!*