

The last leaf

The best known of O Henry's short stories is surely "The Last Leaf" (1907),¹ a tale of love, dying and the human spirit – and, for the Dharma-inspired, a remarkable parable of meaningful happiness. Briefly, the story goes like this. In the early 20th century, two young women artists, Sue and Johnsy (familiar for Joanna), who love one another, or are in love with one another, live together in a studio apartment, on the third floor, in Greenwich Village, New York, where rental is cheap.

One cold November, pneumonia strikes, killing many in the artist colony. Stricken Johnsy lies dying in her bed, watching the falling leaves of an ivy vine on the brick wall through her window, and claims that she would die with it. A visiting doctor gives her only 1 in 10 chances to survive, raising them to 1 in 5 if Sue could get her to hope for something worthwhile like finding a man, but not something fanciful like wanting to "paint the Bay of Naples some day."

Old Mr Behrman, who lives on the ground floor, sometimes works as an artist's model to earn a bit of money. Over the past 40 years, he has made no artistic progress, but hoping one day to paint his masterpiece. He is saddened to learn of Johnsy's hopeless state and tells her not to give up. In fact, Behrman is justly angered, "Are there people in the world with the foolishness to die because leaves drop off a vine? Why do you let that silly business come in her brain?... Some day I will paint a masterpiece, and we shall all go away."

That night, a cold rain falls, with snow and a fierce wind. The next morning, as soon as Sue awakes, Johnsy asks her to pull up the window shade. On the brick wall hangs the last leaf on the vine. It is still dark green at the centre, but with yellow edges.

"It is the last one," says Johnsy. "I thought it would surely fall during the night. I heard the wind. It will fall today and I shall die at the same time."

"Dear, dear!" says Sue, leaning her worn face down toward the bed. "Think of me, if you won't think of yourself. What would I do?" But Johnsy does not answer.

The next morning, Johnsy looks through the window only to see that the ivy leaf is still there. She lies for a long time, looking at it. Then she calls to Sue, who was preparing chicken soup.

"I've been a bad girl," Johnsy announces. "Something has made that last leaf stay there to show me how bad I was. It is wrong to want to die. You may bring me a little soup now." Later she says, "Someday I hope to paint the Bay of Naples."

Later in the day, the doctor sees Johnsy and tells Sue that, with good care, Johnsy will recover. Then he tells Sue that he has another patient in the building who is not so fortunate on account of his age and weak condition. This is Behrman. There is no hope for him, and has to go to the hospital to ease his pains.

Later that day, Sue tells Johnsy that Behrman, after two days of sickness, has just died of pneumonia in the hospital. On the morning of the first day, they found him very sick in his room. His shoes and clothing were completely wet and icy cold. They could not imagine where he had been on such a terrible night.

Then they found a lantern, still lighted, and a ladder that had been moved from its place. And art supplies and a painting board with green and yellow colors mixed on it.

"And look out the window, dear, at the last ivy leaf on the wall. Didn't you wonder why it never moved when the wind blew? Ah, darling, it is Behrman's masterpiece – he painted it there the night that the last leaf fell."

The picture of the last leaf is Behrman's priceless masterpiece because it saves a life – and inspires an enduring story of love, giving and life that continues to inspire posterity.

¹ Short film adaptation (Youtube), starring Mary Huse, Peter Xifo, Demi Dustman and Jonathan Salisbury; directed by Matt Gatlin, 2010: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1dhs1pHyGOI>.

The last leaf by Piya Tan

Besides the general theme of death and dying, there are at least two other interesting points about the story. First, there is unconditional love between the two women. Second, old Behrman epitomizes great compassion, sacrificing his own life for Johnsy even when she does not really deserve it. In doing so, he completes his life's true masterpiece: a single painted leaf that saves the life of another person!

The infinitely loving and compassionate Sue, and the indomitable and self-sacrificing Behrman represent classic Bodhisattva embodiments of compassion and wisdom respectively. While Sue accepts Johnsy just as she is, working in every way to heal her, Behrman quietly acts in his own way to help Johnsy by giving her just what she needs to recover: the lasting figure of a leaf.

There are a hundred leaves at first noticed by Johnsy, but she only notices how they die and drop away in the cold November winds until there is only one. Similarly, many of us who, despite the availability of the Dharma, decide to postpone learning and practising it, thinking that the Dharma is always available to us.

Youth, we think or are told, should be spent in gathering wealth or in pleasure. As the years pass, and the Bodhi leaves drop away, we have even less time for Dharma, and our hearts are increasingly weighed down with self-views and other-words. We collect dead specimens, which we pin and label in our scrapbooks, and show them off to admirers. When a volume is full, we shelf them away, and start another. We never really enjoy any of those specimens living and moving around us.

Our views, like the falling leaves, change over the years. But we never see how we grow and moult with our ideas. We keep thinking our present views are the only right ones, all else wrong. Then the years pass, and our tree becomes bare of leaves, decays, rots and falls.

In the cold dark evening of our lives, we then realize we have not had any really good views anyway! We have been proudly but really wrong all the way. All we can do now is listen to the whole wordy replay by others walking in their squeaky new shoes, showing them off. We do not notice even the ground we stand on, and upon which the Bodhi leaves are falling.

Yet if we look closely enough, we can see, perhaps with some light from a kind and wise friend, that last leaf on the tree. That last leaf is always there, waiting for us, as it were. This last leaf is what is left of the Buddha's ancient wisdom, the compassion of the arhats and teachers who have preserved the true teaching so that it reaches us.

We only need to fully and carefully look at this last leaf. It is the Bodhi leaf of liberating wisdom. Looking deep into this remarkable leaf, our heart is at peace and our minds well clear, so that we can truly see the meaning and purpose of all the years we have lived. So clearly and meaningful is this insight, we are simply joyful, lost for words. Indeed, we don't need them any more.

When we waken from this dream-like moment (seems like a moment, but takes a life-time), we realize that words can be beautiful and healing. Words are meant to be beautiful and healing – like the Buddha word. The beauty inspires such great joy in us that we realize we need not prove ourselves to be worthy of friendship and love. With lovingkindness, we accept ourselves just as we are, and in the same way, we accept others, too.

We have empowered ourselves to awaken to true joy. We are truly and meaningfully happy. We are able to see Dharma in everyone, every story, every word, even in a single leaf.

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