

*THE OLD MAN AND THE SONG (2013)*

*A work in progress*

(sent to the family on Shabbat as my “one good thing”) Oct 25

Fernando is an old man (89) who sings personally at each table at Olemendi's, a Mexican restaurant we frequent. He slowly approaches the table and each time we see him (for the past thirty years), we have to take a breath. It's not our style. We like to be out in public (and then create a private aura around us).

He's always very kind. he always sings us the same love song. (I try to breathe and use the few moments to look deeply into mom's eyes (but I also am aware that I'd love to be eating my huevos rancheros which are getting cold. And i feel like just as he's performing for us, I/we create a performance for him. (Cuz i just want to chow down and keep talking about what we were talking about before being interrupted.

Before he starts singing, he says, "This is my first day back, I've been in the hospital the last two weeks."

Then he sings. He seems in good form. He stops. Now what to say. So, I ask why was he in. His prostate was pushing against his kidney. He Couldn't breathe, even the smallest motion was impossible. So they removed his prostate (oh, pain, he says). Then some other complications he shares (more than probably i needed to know as I think about dipping into the guacamole with tortilla de maize). (too soon!?)

Finally, I say, well, we're glad you're back and still here. He smiles and says "Only God can say why I'm still here or how much longer I have." He then adds "Since God keeps me alive, I wonder if his purpose for me which is to sing to make others happy"

I Namaste with my hands, and then say, "You really look great. And, if it's possible, your voice seems even stronger and clearer. Are you sure you haven't been secretly taking singing lessons these last two weeks!"

He smiles with his eyes, and moves onto the next table.

At the table there is a mother and two children, who are just getting up, so he nods to them. There is only one table left (only 3 groups in the restaurant). He ambles up to their table, asks if they want a song, and they say, no, thank you. He then goes to sit down, and wait for other people to come in.

Now, why is this my one good thing? I wonder what my purpose is. I think to myself, if we weren't here, who would he sing for? Is my purpose to hear his song? To listen (with my one ear!) as carefully as I can to each person's song?

There was something very Hemingway like (Old Man and the Sea) about this situation. Remember in Old Man, at the end, where after all the old man has endured, some tourist sees a carcass of the fish, names it (incorrectly) and then dismisses it in a second. Yet we the readers know more of the story. We know of the old man's determination to fight and keep struggling for life. We know, as Nana said, growing old isn't for the faint of heart. We know how easy it is to dismiss other's lives (like the third couple did at Olemendis) and as there was a part of me that wanted too, also. I'm busy. How dare you intrude on my space (to sing to me!) (really, Deaneo?)

So, listening to his story, trying to hear him, be empathic, make one of my half-green jokes, realize he is all of us struggling. I realized i need to try one or two more degrees to open my heart to other's lives, as I am able. of course, we gave him a "donation" for the song....)most expensive love song ever...and worth every penny....for he gave me a priceless gift..... (opening the eyes of the blind, he became the golden face of the beloved rising over the horizon of my limited perceptions.....

Sorry for the length...consider it longer than a haiku, shorter than a short story....Hemingway would approve, I believe....sending lots of love, poppers of still a work in progress....

PS I went up to the third table, and who had said no, they didn't want to hear him sing, and briefly shared his story. I then gave them a few bucks to give to Fernando, saying I understood their not wanting to be interrupted. I said if they felt so moved, inviting him to sing, a couple of minutes, would do wonders for his healing process. But if they didn't want to, could they just share with him when they left, that they had heard his singing, and it was quite beautiful, and they wanted to thank him.

**Subject:** RE: shabbat shalom - hey!  
**From:** "Shapiro, Johanna" <jfshapir@uci.edu>  
**Date:** Sat, October 26, 2013 10:59 pm  
**To:** "Shapiro, Deane" <dhshapir@uci.edu>

Sweetheart, this is THE BEST story ever. Partly it is Francisco's story, and the courage it takes to live to old age and somehow find the wherewithal to keep going one day at a time, and figure out a way to make life meaningful. (I guess I could take a page, even at this relatively young age). You truly honor his tenacity, and commitment, and strength, and faith. But it is also your story - what a generous, kind, good soul you are, but that even you have less than noble thoughts and struggle with your desires vs. doing the right thing. I was so touched by your honest self-disclosures. The lesson at the end - that Francisco was for you last night your Golden

Face of the Beloved rising over your limited horizon, that he opened your "blind" eyes to deeper truths - really brought tears to my eyes. I also liked the connection to Hemingway - an iconic story that also teaches deep lessons about life and aging (another good reminder for me).

And icing on the cake a perfectly lovely acknowledgement from Shauna who really seems opening to you and appreciating all your great, great gifts. You are a true tzaddik, and dragging me along with you (resisting every inch of the way!). Love so much, J

From: "shauna shapiro" <shaunashapiro@HOTMAIL.COM>  
Subject: RE: shabbat shalom - hey!  
Date: Sat, October 26, 2013 8:06 am  
To: "dad" <dhshapir@uci.edu>,"Shapiro, Johanna" <jfshapir@uci.edu>,"JENA" <hustjen@msn.com>,"josh" <joshdshapiro@yahoo.com>

*X Burt*

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My one good thing this week is the powerful, vulnerable story Dad shared below. I am weeping as I type, so overjoyed to feel Dad's heart so open, generous and loving, and to feel how he is teaching us through the way he is LIVING and BEING in the world. Poppers, thank you. I'm going to keep this story close to me always.