

His body is a golden string your body's hanging from: Leonard Cohen and the disgraced guru

By MATTHEW REMSKI | Published: MAY 1, 2013



an excerpt from *Cohen Koan* (forthcoming, fall 2013)

I believe that you heard your master sing while I lay sick in bed. In the late 90s I opened a magazine and saw a picture of Leonard Cohen sitting beside his teacher Joshu Sasaki Roshi, both of them zen blank-and-stern in brown-black robes, bone-white rings at their left breasts. In recent years I had lost track of his biography, and had no idea that I was mirroring it, thirty-five years his junior. I cut the picture out and put it on my altar next to a picture of myself with my very own crazy Buddhist teacher – Geshe Michael Roach. Cohen's zen uniform had a kind of continuity with his grey-blue suits, and perhaps the gabardine his father had worn in the Canadian Army, or the racks of suits Cohen would have seen hanging in his father's haberdashery. Renunciation and militarism for him have always seemed cut from the same cloth, *en vogue*.

It was strange that Cohen and I both disappeared into ashrams at the same time. At least he was at the right age for it. He seemed to be quitting a global identity, withdrawing into silence and his campy apocalyptic songs to come. I was milking my reluctance to really participate in things, and consoling myself of the consequences. But I think we were both enthralled by charismatic teachers who offered a radiant and ambivalent image of patriarchal yet revolutionary confidence that seemed to allow us to relax into obedience and hiding, even as it validated our resentments. For so many men, the spiritual path is a road for

those who don't know how to be their own fathers, who crave to relive the crisis of clashing with authority, to retest themselves, perversely enthralled by the strange virtues of the bully. There's an erotic self-hatred in it: it feels good to rub yourself raw and then to rub yourself away against an absolute. It feels like justice, like what you deserve. Your right to be here is liminal in the shadows of the temple, the church, Geshe Michael, Abraham, Roshi. But the shadow also protects you and makes you invisible if you are too fearful to grow.

In a film by Armelle Brusq ("[Leonard Cohen: Printemps 96](#)"), Cohen talks about Joshu Roshi as his guru:

The quality of relationship that is possible with Roshi is very instructive. You know, he's both the friend and the enemy. He's just what he is. And of course he's going to be an enemy to your self-indulgence, an enemy to your laziness, and a friend to your effort. He's going to be cutting, he's going to be charming, he's going to be lovable, he's going to be deceptive. He's going to be all the things that he has to be to turn you away from depending on him. And finally you just say: This guy is absolutely true. He really loves me so much, that I don't need to depend on him. His love is a liberating kind of love. His company is a liberating kind of company. So he's only interested in you making an effort to be yourself. So that's a very very helpful kind of friend, and that's the kind of friend we should try to be to each other.

Sounds great. But if you shovel through the shimmer just a bit you may see, as I do, that Roshi isn't quite there, aside from a cascade of projected needs, negations and double-negations, wishes for acceptance, and assumptions of paternal sympathy. Roshi's power is embedded in his ambivalence, and devotion to him hinges on the erotic crises of attention and validation. Tension is key. The tension of not knowing whether he will embrace you or castigate you. As a devotee, you need him to reject you as much as he accepts you, or the acceptance will not feel as sweet. We're not talking about intersubjective relationship here, in which a dyad mutually feels and receives and responds to each other's needs. We're talking about an emotional and power imbalance that thrives on the teacher seducing through concealment, and the student desperately craving what is hidden, and only occasionally seeing it, and taking any attention at all as a sign of love. Part of me wonders if Cohen fell in love with the type of man he himself was to many of the women in his past.

What can I tell you, my brother, my killer? To his credit, and to cover his ass, Michael Roach actually laid this shadow-game of intimate ambivalence out on the line, teaching that the teacher (himself, particularly) was “empty” – code for “lacking inherent qualities” – or “the blank slate” upon which the student was shining his own needs, and, more starkly, the qualities of his own mind. Which then meant that the teacher’s own day-by-day nuts-and-bolts behaviour was forever indefinable, baffling, and blameless. This would be true whether the teacher “seemed” outright manipulative or just plain stupid. The teacher becomes a black hole of interpretation, and in that darkness we dream the sun. We look at the teacher’s blank face, his empty eyes, and we search for ourselves, and are strangely comforted by no response at all. His power depends on you not being seen or understood by him in the way that you understand yourself. He floats somewhere on the autism spectrum: his lack of concrete personality relieves you of the pressure of your own identity, and of relating to others. He absolves you of the burden of self-knowledge, ironically, just as the jargon tells you that you are being led towards it. He replaces the Golden Rule with the Golden Bubble. The enigma factor is key, because it imitates the enigma of life. The teacher cannot be known, life cannot be known. The teacher becomes the sign and proof of the impossibility of knowing, and the intolerable weight of consciousness. *His body is a golden string that your body is hanging from.*

There is immense pleasure in it. You can see it in the one video clip [from a film yet to be released](#) of Joshu Roshi holding court with his disciples. Cohen sits at his left hand in what looks like the old man’s living room, listening with a smile as he boasts of his longevity in front of a spread of crappy-looking finger foods. “Doctor says I will live to 120”, reads the caption in white. His Japanese sounds declamatory and jocular to me, but what do I know about Japanese? He taunts the camera – that it has captured “nothing”, and suggesting that by looking for something external, the cameraman has disappeared to himself. Then he sticks out his plump pink tongue and blows a raspberry. In another clip, he gestures broadly with his ancient hands while reciting a koan in which a child is confused about how a flower can bloom in the morning and close up in the evening. He apes the confusion of the child with vaudevillian flair. He “shows the koan” by opening the flower of his hand, then snapping it closed, and pausing, repeating and then gazing into the camera with the same piercing quality I’m sure he used in the *sanzen* interviews with his devotees, a gaze made more piercing by the possibility that he could, and would, instantly withdraw it.

I know that gaze from the charismatic teachers I've been with. If you are unsure of yourself, if through your terror, as Adam Phillips says in *Terrors and Experts*, you crave blinding expertise, you turn towards this gaze like the sun. Your flesh melts into infantile softness, as though you were looking at your father for the first time from your bassinet. It never occurs to you that your father is terrified as well.

Now that I have a baby boy, I have felt this from the other side: Jacob's eyes fixed upon me at four weeks old in the ecstasy of logarithmic neurogenesis. We are unequal beings, and I know it. He has exteroception and interoception, but not proprioception. I have all three, plus cognition, plus metacognition, plus the heavy grammar of time. I can control the mood between us with my gaze. In my features he receives the imprint of human otherness. He mimics my oral movements. At seven weeks we mirror each other's vocalizations. I ape before him at ten weeks with faces and jabberwocky, and he overflows with giggling, a first kundalini rush. If I can fill him with wonder and giddy joy, I also know I can terrorize him. This is the power of the guru. I provoke broader responses from the baby than his mother Alix does: I am more unfamiliar. She is his constancy, and I am his revelation. The revelation fascinates, seduces, and can become controlling. Perhaps those of us who lacked a sense of constancy in our lives reach always for the revelation. When the revelation becomes constant, we reach again.

I watched the clip of Joshu Roshi and felt a gurgle of infantile joy within me. It bubbled up like Jacob's giggling, immediately throwing me back to my time spent with other charismatics. It was an old feeling: a feeling of being seen, perhaps for the first time, being chosen, being spoken to directly by an intelligence I did not understand, a demand to grow. The contact opens up an insatiable channel: I remember wanting this feeling to never leave me. It felt like waking up, and that my father would always be there, that I would always be safe.

I show the clip to Alix, and she smiles quizzically. I ask her, "You don't think he's speaking to you directly, do you?" "Of course not," she replies. "He's playing to a camera. He's just doing his vaudeville bullying thing." She looks at me with puzzled empathy. "Can't you see that?"

What is the difference between Alix and I, that she automatically stands outside of this gaze, that it wouldn't occur to her to be drawn to the charismatic sphere? What do I lack? Why am I so easily addicted to the strange attention of the patriarch, even when it turns ugly?

I consider my Catholic childhood. Maybe it has something to do with how liturgical time and space would carve out moments of sacred crisis, and harden the division between the holy and the secular. I think when I watch Roshi in that clip I feel I am watching a holy moment, for which a sacrament has been designed, and in its delivery I am capturing the small amount of meaning that is available to me in my short and unfocused time. I grew up in churches, and felt an ontological ripple as I crossed over their thresholds, whether coming or going. The church was a church because it was demarcated off from the mundane world. I crossed church thresholds as if they were the back of the Narnia wardrobe.

Alix says she never needed to escape. “Were there any places in your childhood that you considered holy?” I ask her. “None more than any others” she answers. I try to imagine that. “If a place was holy”, she continued, “it was because I made it so, like the nights I lit as many tea lights as I could find in my bedroom when I was fifteen.” This is what I didn’t have: leave to create my own sacred space, my own internal authority, my own access to grace. So I became a seeker.

Now the dirt is coming out on old Roshi, now 105, and almost dead. It is now public knowledge that for decades he enticed, seduced, tricked or forced dozens of his western female acolytes into various forms of sexual service. He would tell them that to yield to him was to obey a cosmic harmony, and that not yielding would keep their minds closed and dull. He interfered in the marriages of his students. He threatened non-compliers with mental darkness or social isolation. Now it seems that many if not all of his senior students were aware of this bullshit, according to [Susanna Stewart's letter](#) to the *oshos* and the Rinzai-Ji Board of Directors.



via Naipan

Undoubtedly the senior students have been creative, prolific, and koan-like in their rationalizations for decades. Stewart suggests that nobody called the old man out publicly because he threatened to stop teaching if they did. It's extraordinary to consider that the mystique of Roshī's *oshos* may have been built on their ability to mystify the obvious and pardon the unpardonable – a skill easily confused, it seems, with the skill of describing, as zen longs to, the indescribable.

Roshī's addiction was an open secret amidst his circle going back as far as the early 70s – so much so that in 1973 they procured a mail-order Japanese bride for him to keep his zen-stick occupied in the more customary manner. But it goes back even further – Giko David Rubin, who [unearthed the stories](#) of twenty-three of the women whom Joshu Roshī abused also contacted some elderly colleagues of his from Japan, who confirmed that his sexual predation was scandalous in the 50s. It seems he wound up in L.A. permanently after having soiled one too many robes in Kyoto. Genjo Marinello, a commenter on one of the [online threads](#) now spinning out of control as Roshī's abuse collides with the faith his acolytes have invested in him suggests as much: that Joshu was in prison for who-knows-what before immigrating and has left unacknowledged children in the shadows of his temples.

In my experience, these guys never just have one weakness. The guru who is fucking everyone he can is also lying continually – covering up, covering over, maintaining appearances, saving face. It's not just the women who are violated in the lonely and debasing interviews of *sanzen*, although that would be bad enough. It's everyone who came to this man for guidance in any matter, because as he's sitting there listening to you pour your heart out about your life and relationships and terrors and practice, he's also busy wondering if he's covered his tracks well enough, or how he's going to score the next piece of ass. The enigma of his face is in part the concentrated mask of a sociopath who is juggling countless balls of deceit. His vaudeville hides a darker burlesque. The gaze is searing, but he's not looking at you. The tragic devotee will say "He's looking through me", which carries the unconscious meaning of: "I'm not really here." There's a good chance he's never seen you. He doesn't want to see you. He's visualizing your panties. He probably can't remember your name. Narcissists cannot see you. Is it so hard to learn this because we are as fascinated with their image as they are?

Now your love is a secret all over the block, and it never stops, not even when your master fails. The title of [Eshu Martin's exposé](#) of Joshu Roshi – "Everybody Knows" – makes opaque reference to Cohen's ties to the old man, but I don't think anyone's directly called it out. I'll take a shot at it. *The odds are there to beat.* And what could be a greater homage than the effort it takes to keep a would-be hero honest?

Who would believe that over a thirty-plus year relationship with Joshu Roshi (they met in 1969) including then five-odd years of service as his personal attendant and chauffeur, and for years a Director on the Rinzaï-Ji Board, that Cohen wasn't aware, [when everyone else was](#), of the oppressive predation tentpoling the old man's robes? Was he blind? Was he duped? "You can't con a con," as another guru of mine used to say.

Cohen is a master diagnostician of debauched masculinity, warring desires, and unintegrated shadows. If anything, I imagine he actually gravitated to someone who had managed to perfectly enshroud the most intimate sins in the stark beauty of the koan. In fact, he says as much, in [the unreleased film](#):

The kind of mythology that we had in the 60s, we had the idea that Roshis were crazy. They were wild. So those of us who were interested in such matters gravitated to teachers who were quite flawed as human beings, but that's what we cherished. We wanted to see the dark side made bright.

Years ago, I might have nodded at that last line and *mm-hmmed* under my breath as though I'd just taken a bong hit, but now I'm thinking — what the hell does this even mean? *We wanted to see the dark side made bright?* Does it mean: we wanted to deny the questionable behaviour we saw? If the *oshos* were watching Roshi's predation for years, does it mean: we wanted to see the *eros* (or possibly *caritas*, or is it *agapé*?) of sexual inequality, harassment, assault? Does it mean: we wanted to forgive what we saw? Does it mean: we wanted to see the genius of cruelty, or the mysticism of madness? Or does it mean: Well, I got this condition, see — whenever I open my mouth, poetic obfuscations just dribble right out! There's no stoppin' 'em!

"Another Former Inji" (*inji* is the personal attendant to the abbot) [writes](#) that sometime in the late 1970s (she was in her mid-twenties at the time) she chauffeured Cohen and Roshi to dinner, and that the old man offered her sexually to the poet, who declined, embarrassed. Leonard said to her "You think he's such a nice old man, but he's a monster." A monster to be contemplated, evidently, but not challenged.

So what is this attraction to monsters? In part I imagine Cohen was attracted to someone who had elevated the aesthetic of the non-sequitur aphorism to the level of scripture. Think: Joshu is a man who has attained mythic status in a spiritual discourse that relies upon the continual deconstruction of sanctimony, language and signs. More Dadaist theatre than a religion, zen can be indistinguishable from symbolist, modernist and postmodernist poetry, all rolled together — kind of like Cohen's opus. In the flesh, I imagine Cohen was attracted to a man who could spiritualize his own narcissism. Cohen, koan, Cohen. Two premier practitioners of their respective arts recognize each other, are magnetized to each other. I imagine them drinking plum brandy together over the old Yeatsian saw: "You can perfect the art or the life, but not both".

Teacher and student never mirror each other equally. Cohen plays the supplicant, Roshi plays master. Roshi names Cohen "Jikan", which means "silence", which couldn't be a bigger joke, but it relieves the poet of his public voice. The poet, who always breaks power's mold with transgressive verse, now gets to make amends in the quiet, amongst the mountain stones and the stony faces of his fellow students. *A tiny band of steel-jawed zealots*, as he calls them in *Book of Longing*, published seven years after leaving Mount Baldy.

But it's never really in the quiet. The problem with famous public confessionism is that you can neither love someone nor ask for forgiveness outside of the show. People come from France to make documentaries about your seclusion. *Now your love is a secret all over the block.*

In *Book of Longing*, amongst other tales of liminal learning and stained sainthood, Cohen describes staying up all night sitting *zazen*, writing, cataloguing his precarious mental health, drawing nudes, and watching porn with Roshi, this elder statesman of metaphysical depravity. If I close my eyes I can see the blue glow on the wall, and the silhouettes of two bald men, motionless, as though in meditation, transfixed by their lust and their pain, and the performance of it all.

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This is excerpted from a book I intend to publish this coming fall.

My personal interest in this story comes from having shadowed Cohen's career as a writer fascinated with religious language and charismatic teachers.

Using material drawn from Cohen's artistic and spiritual biography, Cohen Koan mines the anxiety of influence, recalls generational conflict in the Toronto literary world over the past twenty years, reflects on the often violent bonds between fathers and sons, and tracks my familial relationships as counterpoint to my abstract and once-idealizing relationship to Cohen. It's also a premature eulogy for the end of the poetic voice that for millennia has attempted to aestheticize the barbarism of religious power.

The italicized lines are excerpted from Cohen's songs and poems, and they are inserted into the narrative in much the same way that they often have inserted themselves into my reverie since I first heard his voice at the age of thirteen: like subtitles for a film that's almost about me, but not quite.

Editor's note: YFSP is honored to present this work. Please read Matthew Remski's excellent remix of Patanjali, [Threads of Yoga](#), and learn more about his other work at www.matthewremski.com.