

## On Seeing “The Weeping Camel”

By Leah Stenson

I recently saw a little gem of a movie called “The Weeping Camel.” This unpretentious film offered a fascinating glimpse of Mongolia with its ancient culture on the cusp of “civilization.” The gist of the story is simple. A camel has given birth and now rejects her calf—presumably because the camel herders, those nomadic inhabitants of the Gobi Desert, had pulled the calf from her womb in an attempt to save the mother during a breach birth. The herders believe that the mother has rejected her offspring because she is ‘angry’ and resentful about the pain she suffered as a result of the birth. For whatever reason, the camel refuses to nurse her baby.

The Mongolians try coaxing the mother camel to nurse her crying newborn. They make offerings to gods or spiritual forces. When that doesn’t work they try forcing her. They nudge the baby into position underneath the mother and tie the mother’s hind legs so she can’t run off or push her baby away. Eventually, they reach the conclusion that there is only one remedy—the balm of music from a musician who plays the Mongolian version of the violin. The sons of the household are dispatched on camelback to a nearby city to find a “violinist” who arrives in timely fashion on a motor scooter with his instrument slung over his shoulder.

The Mongolian family gathers to witness the magic. One of the women softly strokes the camel while she sings an ethereal, poignant song to the accompaniment of the violin. Like a siren’s song, the music has the desired effect. As the mother camel allows her offspring to nurse for the first time, the camel appears to weep tears of joy and remorse. It was truly a mystical moment captured on film. There wasn’t a dry eye in the theater.

Before I went to see this movie, I was feeling quite angry with my mother—a woman who has criticized and insulted me for most of my life. When I was in college, she kicked me out of the house because I wanted to live with my boyfriend. Then, when I wanted to marry him, she offered him \$5,000 to leave me; and when it became apparent that she couldn't stop our marriage, she begrudgingly gave her blessing, saying coldly, "It's your bed, go lie in it." Only after I gave her two grandchildren did her heart seem to soften. This is not to say that she now warmly embraces or nurtures me.

Recently, my older daughter Marisa decided to go to Mongolia to work as a volunteer in an orphanage. The day my mother learned that Marisa was making the trip she called me late at night to berate me and let me know what a bad parent I was. Bad for letting my daughter go to such a dangerous place; bad for indulging her and spending money needlessly on international travel; bad for not encouraging my daughter to concentrate on her studies at home in the US. I tried to explain that the trip was a college graduation present; that Mongolia wasn't a dangerous place; that the program was arranged by a reputable organization; that I was proud my daughter wanted to help people; that I considered it a privilege to support such a worthwhile cause; but my mother wouldn't have any of it and the conversation ended with her hanging up in a huff. I was stunned into silence which gave way to anger.

My anger ran deep. I realized I was again reliving the anger of my youth, this time through my daughter. I was Marisa's age when my mother tried to invalidate my dreams and prevent me from being true to myself. Now, she was doing it again, only this time with Marisa.

I didn't call my mother for several weeks after this episode, and when I did call her it was a perfunctory call to let her know that my brother in San Francisco was having health problems. She retaliated on my birthday by sending a card without a check—my mother always sends checks for birthdays and holidays, so I knew this was her way of

letting me know that she was still angry. In response, I entertained the idea of canceling a trip I had already scheduled to visit her. After all, why would I want to subject myself to someone who has caused—and continued to cause—me so much pain.

It was in the midst of this personal pain and emotional turmoil that I happened to see “The Weeping Camel.” I was struck by the realization that, metaphorically speaking, no one had yet played the music that could sooth my mother’s suffering—her seemingly intractable pain that was rooted in the suicide of her father and accidental death of her mother; a miscarriage; a double mastectomy; and a slew of life’s lesser tragedies.

I often suffer from self-recrimination when I realize how easily I can become angry at my mother instead of trying to help her transcend her suffering. It’s extremely frustrating when she takes out her hurt and anger on me and others who are close to me. In fact, the last time we visited her, my younger daughter Emily, an accomplished violinist, was so angry at her Grandmother that she refused to play the violin for her.

When I saw “The Weeping Camel,” some of my anger towards my mother was purged in the tears I shed. I realized then that the Mongolian nomads were actually quite wise in refusing to give up. They did everything within their power to heal the rift between the mother camel and her baby, and then truly rejoiced after they succeeded in uniting them. After seeing this film, I realized that I too couldn’t allow myself to give up. This year when I visit my mother I’ll pray for the wisdom to soothe her lifelong suffering—and I’ll also pray that during this next visit to Grandma’s, Emily will play the violin.

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