

Excerpt from **The Night Air** ("The Laziest Son")
by Rumi

A man on his deathbed left instructions
for dividing up his goods among his three sons.
He has devoted his entire spirit to those sons.
They stood like cypress trees around him,
quiet and strong.

He told the town judge,
"Whichever of my sons is laziest,
give him all the inheritance."

Then he died, and the judge turned to the three,
"Each of you must give some account of your
laziness, so I can understand just how you are
lazy."

Gnostics are experts in laziness. They rely on it,
because they continuously see God working all
around them. The harvest keeps coming in, yet
they never even did the ploughing!

"Come on. Say something about the ways you are
lazy."

Every spoken word is a covering for the inner self.
A little curtain-flick no wider than a slice.
of roast meat can reveal hundreds of exploding
suns. Even if what is being said is trivial and
wrong, the listener hears the source. One breeze
comes from across a garden. Another from across
the ash-heap. Think how different the voices of the
fox and the lion, and what they tell you!
Hearing someone is lifting the lid off the cooking
pot. You learn what's for supper. Though some
people can know just by the smell, a sweet stew
from a sour soup cooked with vinegar.

A man taps a clay pot before he buys it
to know by the sound if it has a crack.

The eldest of the three brothers told the judge,
"I can know a man by his voice, and if he won't
speak, I wait three days, and then I know him
intuitively."

The second brother, "I know him when he speaks,
and if he won't talk, I strike up a conversation."

"But what if he knows that trick?" asked the judge.

Which reminds me of the mother who tells her
child, "When you're walking through the graveyard
at night and you see a bogeyman, run at it,
and it will go away."

"But what," replies the child, "if the bogeyman's
mother has told it to do the same thing?
Bogeymen have mothers too."

The second brother had no answer.

The judge then asked the youngest brother,
"What if a man cannot be made to say anything?
How do you learn his hidden nature?"

"I sit in front of him in silence,
and set up a ladder made of patience,
and if in his presence a language from beyond joy
and beyond grief begins to pour from my chest,
I know that his soul is as deep and bright
as the star Canopies rising over Yemen.
And so when I start speaking a powerful right arm
of words sweeping down, I know him from what I
say, and how I say it, because there's a window
open between us, mixing the night air of our
beings."

The youngest was, obviously,
the laziest. He won.