

What the waves are saying

The biblical boy Samuel was born during a dark time in Israel's history. The nation's priests had lost interest in the God who brought them out of Egypt. They were more impressed by the gods of the Philistines, who were so much more prosperous than the Israelites. And they had begun to make of their own religion a profitable business. Israel's spiritual condition is aptly summed up in the opening lines of the Book of Samuel: *The word of the Lord was rare in those days and there was no frequent vision; the high priest Eli's eyes had begun to grow dim.*

Still, *the lamp of God had not yet gone out.* The boy Samuel, serving at the high priest Eli's temple, was still innocent enough to pick up the whisper to which God had been reduced. He wasn't sure of the source of the inspiration he felt, but he had the curiosity to say: *Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth.* And what that child heard was a challenge from God that would produce an age of prophets, of moral poetry that would forever deepen humanity's understanding of what true freedom and humanity are all about! Of course, it took a child to hear that whisper. Adults too often lose that capacity. They become deaf to any other opinion but their own; blind to any other vision but short term gain. That was true of Samuel's era; it's true of our own modern age.

Take for example Mr. Dombey in Dickens's *Dombey and Son*. A prosperous, uncompromising businessman, he was much like the new railroads in which his Firm invested: a kind of juggernaut, determined to push his way forward, to lay track through town and countryside, to create a shambles of the landscape and people's lives, as long as it produced a profit. And he was so satisfied when at last his wife produced a son named Paul to share top billing in the Firm's title: Dombey and Son! But how inconvenient for the mother to die in childbirth. And how inconvenient that the son remained so frail! How could Nature be so uncooperative with the will and intent of the great House of Dombey? And why was the child so pensive, so distracted as he grew to boyhood?

Well, perhaps, like Samuel, the boy (being not suited to his father's kind of world) was more susceptible to echoes and visions of another reality beyond materialism. While convalescing by the sea side one day he awoke suddenly from his slumber and listened. His sister Florence asked him what he heard: *"I want to know what it says," he answered, looking steadily in her face. "The sea, Floy, what is it that it keeps on saying?" She told him that it was only the noise of the rolling waves. "Yes, yes," he said. "But I know that they are always saying something. Always the same thing. What place is over there?" He rose up, looking eagerly at the horizon. She told him that there was another country opposite, but he said he didn't mean that; he meant further away - further away! Very often afterward, in the midst of their talk, he would break off, to try to understand what it was that the waves were always saying; and would rise up in his couch to look toward that invisible region far away.*

Perhaps there's still some vestige of a child within each of us that, despite the material din of the Dombey's of this world, can still hear what the waves are saying - that despite the admonition: *'Tis but the noise of water / Dashing against the shore / And the wind from some bleaker quarter / Mingling with its roar,* insists: *No! it is something greater / That speaks to the heart alone / The voice of the great Creator / Dwells in that mighty tone!* (Joseph Edward Carpenter)