

"An Angel in Each Future"

Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno
August 21, 2016

"Epithalamion" By Penelope Duckworth

"Every man contemplates an angel in his future self." R.W. Emerson

There is an angel in each future.
We spend years searching for one
who will unfurl that becoming.

Van Gogh saw the church
with a child's eye,
the air all whirring wings in circles,
everything alive,
colors intensifying
then receding.
The shapes themselves
lifting, changing.
The steeple spirals up toward heaven.
The sky, deep and vivid
invites itself into the windows.
Two footpaths come around the church,
join and widen in the sunlight.

We look up one day and see,
running toward us
with arms out
(or are they wings),
a whole body saying
bounty,
blessing,
yes.

Months ago this poem floated into my day. I caught it and tucked it away for a summer sermon and this is the one.

I love the start, the Emerson quote:

“Every man contemplates an angel in his future self.”

I love the finish:

Bounty. Blessing. Yes.

That's all I needed.

Last week I packed up for retreat looking forward to unpacking the poem while cloistered away at Wisdom House.

I soon realize that this poem is a bit of a mystery. But I am up for the challenge. I have the time, the space, the quiet.

So ...

First of all, what does “Epithalamion” mean?

The Poetry Foundation tells us that an “epithalamion is a [lyric](#) poem in praise of the Greek god of marriage [whose name is] Hymen. An epithalamion often blesses a wedding and in modern times is often read at the wedding ceremony or reception.”

Okay. So right off, I'm a bit thrown.

I keep going.

What about Emerson's quote? I dig, dig and dig around and finally – *finally* (in this age of relatively quick finds, that is) – the source is found.

The source is found in a footnote

in a scholarly essay included in

the 1904 edition of *Emerson's Complete Works*.

Author of the essay: who knows?

But I'm grateful for the lead however scant. The footnote details: "In an early journal (1830) of his first wife Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: 'Ellen Tucker wondered whether the spirits in Heaven look onward to their immortality, as we on Earth, or are absorbed in the present moment.' In the same journal entry he wrote: 'Every man contemplates an angel in his future self.' "

Ellen Tucker, Emerson's first wife, is 18 when they meet. He is 25. He is smitten, taken by her intelligence and beauty. They soon marry and she dies soon after. Tuberculosis. Very sad. She is his first love and he holds her memory close for the rest of his life.

I move on.

*There is an angel in each future
We spend years searching for one
Who will unfurl that becoming.*

I hearken back to a seminary class on process theology. A class that nearly breaks my brain. My professor speaks of God as "becoming". Not as in "That shirt is becoming on you." But rather, God is present in a process of our becoming.

Do we spend years searching for God? Might God unfurl our becoming?

I move onto the Van Gogh part of the poem.

There are 25 nuns on silent retreat at Wisdom House where I am also spending my study retreat. They had a program. The presenter, Carol Berry, is the author of a book entitled, "Vincent Van Gogh: His Spiritual Vision in Life and Art" Her presentation was about Vincent van Gogh and Henri Nouwen, the Catholic Theologian.

Isn't that amazing?

Although the week-long program was not open to me, I did buy Berry's book and learned a few things about van Gogh that I hadn't known before. For one, the painting at the center of the poem was one of the 700 created in the 70 days leading to van Gogh's death. That's right: in 70 days he painted 700 paintings (and did quite a bit of drawing) and "*The Church in Auvers-sur-Oise*" was one of them.

The profound beauty and the profound tragedy of it all is breathtaking.

The poet describes the painting so beautifully,

*the air all whirring wings in circles,
everything alive,
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She starts off with the claim that "van Gogh saw the church / with a child's eye". Would that she began, "Van Gogh saw the church / with a mystic's eye." A mystic: one who seeks to be united with God through contemplation / prayer / service.

Sorrowful yet always rejoicing. 2 Corinthians 6:10

This bit of scripture was Vincent Van Gogh's favorite. In the prolific correspondence between Vincent and his beloved brother and benefactor, Theo, both often harkened back to this sentiment.

Sorrowful yet always rejoicing.

I read excerpts of letters from Vincent to Theo:

If one feels the need of something great, something infinite, something where one feels one can see God, one need not go far to find it. I think I saw something deeper, more eternal than the ocean, expressed in the eyes of a little baby when it awoke in the morning. 1882

And I begin to wonder: did van Gogh ever come across Emerson's writings? They were barely contemporaries. Emerson was born 50 years before van Gogh but they were on this earth on this plane at the same time for 29 years, Emerson's long life overlapping Van Gogh's too-brief life. I take up another thread that leads me to a contemporary environmental ethicist and theologian named Tyson Lord Gray. He, for one, has a hunch that van Gogh was aware of Emerson's writings and in particular the essay entitled, "Nature." I have a hunch that his hunch is spot on.

Because van Gogh imbued the natural world with meaning and spirit. Because he had an approach to life, to art, to God that was, in fact, transcendentalist in spirit.

*We look up one day and see,
running toward us
with arms out
(or are they wings)
a whole body saying
bounty,
blessing,
yes.*

Everything we search for is it at last, within? Is that angel in our future, the one we contemplate, is that angel always coming toward us? And to bless? To remind us of our bounty?

Yes?

I must start writing. It's time to start writing.

Here's what I've got: a lyric poem that's read at a wedding or reception that starts with a quote by a revered former Unitarian minister-turned-essayist. He's heartbroken. His young wife has died wondering about the nature of immortality. God as becoming? A description of a beautiful painting created by a beautiful Soul who died soon thereafter. Intense. Mystic. Maybe there's a dash of Emerson in the air that's all "whirring wings." From the artist's masterpiece we look up and see running towards us maybe an angel. Bounty. Blessing. Yes.

And honestly, Dear Souls. I'm stumped.

When one writes a sermon you must be prepared to travel many uncharted roads. You rely on trust alone for there are no maps. You trust that all of these roads will converge usually in a way you had not at all anticipated *but they will converge*. In preparing sermons week after week, you experience a kind of grace over and over again. You land in places you had not imagined.

Oh! I'm here! What a lovely – and surprising – view!

On Sunday morning, just as the congregation is taking in the scenery for the first time, more often than not; the preacher is also new to the environs.

Not this time. Not this time. I am in the wilderness. I am like the newcomer to Southeastern CT: I am Noank, thinking it is Niantic. I am trying but not finding Abbott's – or Costello's or Captain Scott's. (Why are the lobster shanties around here so hard to find?)

But I must start writing.

Here's another companion for birthing the sermon: surrender. Actually surrender is the companion to birthing anything of import, and actually, birthing a baby, too!

So that's what I did. That's what I've done.

I don't know what this poem means. But there are things that only in surrendering that I have come to know:

At this point in life I know that I don't need to understand everything, least of all this poem.

I know that art - visual art, music, dance, in this case, poetry is an encounter and communion with the holy. With what is pure. With what brings us closer to our essence, our deepest soul. And sometimes you have to learn how to experience that encounter. I learned how to experience performance art. It's like learning how to hear Jimi Hendrix or Phillip Glass. How to see Jean-Michel Basquiat or Frida Kahlo. How to comprehend a jazz poet or a hip hop artist.

Sometimes the power of art, the power of beauty is only about the way it washes over you. We don't have to understand it. We just have to surrender to it. Try it on. See if it fits. See if it opens our hearts.

And I know this: I know that I love this poem. I loved it the first time I read it. I trusted that I'd find something there to share with you beyond the start and the finish.

And I hope I did. Although I have walked you to the wilderness, to unmapped territory, I hope that you can discern, just up the road a piece
*"Two footpaths coming around [our] church,
 joining and widening in the sunlight."*

And I hope that you can be open to trust and surrender leading us to deeper understanding and beauty.

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Bounty. Blessing. Yes.

Amen.

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)

The Church in Auvers-sur-Oise, View from the Chevet

<https://tysonlordjgray.com/2012/09/08/van-gogh-through-the-eyes-of-an-environmental-ethicist/>