

Is Poetry Necessary?
Sunday, May 9, 2021
Mother's Day Music Service

*"My mother is a poem I'll never be able to write
though everything I write is a poem to my mother."
--Sharon Doubiago, in Tillie Olsen,
Mother to Daughter, Daughter to Mother*

- Introit** In Time of Silver Rain
 Text: Langston Hughes; Music: George Walker
- Anthem** Breathe Soft Ye Winds
 Text: Ambrose Philips; Music: Hester Maria Park
- Reading** The Lanyard, by Billy Collins

The other day I was ricocheting slowly
off the blue walls of this room,
moving as if underwater from typewriter to piano,
from bookshelf to an envelope lying on the floor,
when I found myself in the L section of the dictionary
where my eyes fell upon the word lanyard.

No cookie nibbled by a French novelist
could send one into the past more suddenly—
a past where I sat at a workbench at a camp
by a deep Adirondack lake
learning how to braid long thin plastic strips
into a lanyard, a gift for my mother.

I had never seen anyone use a lanyard
or wear one, if that's what you did with them,
but that did not keep me from crossing
strand over strand again and again
until I had made a boxy
red and white lanyard for my mother.

She gave me life and milk from her breasts,
and I gave her a lanyard.
She nursed me in many a sick room,
lifted spoons of medicine to my lips,
laid cold face-cloths on my forehead,
and then led me out into the airy light

and taught me to walk and swim,
and I, in turn, presented her with a lanyard.
Here are thousands of meals, she said,
and here is clothing and a good education.
And here is your lanyard, I replied,
which I made with a little help from a counselor.

Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,
strong legs, bones and teeth,
and two clear eyes to read the world, she whispered,
and here, I said, is the lanyard I made at camp.
And here, I wish to say to her now,
is a smaller gift—not the worn truth

that you can never repay your mother,
but the rueful admission that when she took
the two-tone lanyard from my hand,
I was as sure as a boy could be
that this useless, worthless thing I wove
out of boredom would be enough to make us even.

Anthem Mother to Son Text: Langston Hughes; Music: Gwyneth Walker

Reading from the Buddhist sutra on compassion

Let none deceive another,
Or despise any being in any state.
Let none through anger or ill-will Wish harm upon another.
Even as a mother protects with her life Her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart Should one cherish all living beings;
Radiating kindness over the entire world:
Spreading upwards to the skies,
And downwards to the depths;
Outwards and unbounded,
Freed from hatred and ill-will.

Anthem The Sky Above the Roof
Text: Mable Dearmer/Paul Verlaine; Music: Ralph Vaughn-Williams

Reading “Morning Has Broken” by Eleanor Farjeon

Morning has broken like the first morning,
Blackbird has spoken like the first bird.
Praise for the singing, praise for the morning,
Praise for them springing fresh from the word.

Sweet the rains new fall, sunlit from Heaven,
Like the first dewfall on the first grass.
Praise for the sweetness of the wet garden,
Sprung in completeness where God’s feet pass.

Mine is the sunlight, mine is the morning
Born of the one light, Eden saw play.
Praise with elation, praise every morning
God’s recreation of the new day.

Anthem Will There Really Be a Morning?
Text: Emily Dickinson; Music Craig Hella Johnson

Reflection “Is Poetry Necessary?” Rev. Ken Read-Brown

My words this morning will be briefer than usual, since most of the “sermon” for today’s service has been the music and the poetry.

As for poetry, this week I came across this thought provoking passage from the poet, priest, and anti-war activist Daniel Berrigan, who died in 2016:

We are right in venturing that poetry is not necessary; prose is necessary, which is to say, prose is an instrument of efficiency. It belongs to the “things which are seen.” Poetry, on the other hand, is unnecessary in the sense that God is unnecessary. Poetry is useless in the sense that God is useless. Which is to say, God and poetry are not part of the kingdom of necessity.

I said I’d be brief, and I will be in spite of the fact that there is plenty to unpack in Berrigan’s words, maybe even some things to argue with!

After all... poetry “unnecessary”?!

What could he possibly mean?

Well, his words remind me of a thought that often recurs for me as, for example, I stand before a particularly beautiful sunrise, when “morning has broken like the first morning” – the sort of sunrise that takes your breath away... free show!

The thought is this, and it isn’t limited to the beauty of a sunrise, but could be the beauty of high noon on a perfect spring day or the beauty of a starlit night sky or a hummingbird at the feeder...: All this beauty and our human response to such things as far as I can tell has no practical benefit – is not, to put it another way, necessary for our survival. Not part of the “kingdom of necessity.”

Yet... the beauty... whether of the sunrise or of a poem... inarguably feeds my soul. Might not be *necessary* to my biological survival or health, yet in another way is *essential* to my soul’s survival and health.

How about mothers? Here, too, we might say there is one kingdom (or queendom) of necessity and another of the essential.

Biologically speaking we are each born of a mother – a necessity in order to be alive. *Spiritually* speaking, a mother’s love... (mothering love, whether from our biological mother, adoptive mother, or whomever, whatever gender)... is *essential* to our soul’s health and growth.

We could have a conversation here, I know, since, for example as we’ve learned, an infant whose every physical need is met but who has not love does not thrive, not only spiritually but also biologically.

So maybe the distinctions are not as clear as I’ve been suggesting thus far. Each of us is, after all, one living being, body and soul intertwined.

Yet this point remains: There is more to life and certainly more to the flourishing of life than the “kingdom (or realm) of necessity” offers. Yes, the realm of necessity is just that: necessary. We need food and drink and adequate shelter and so on. But Berrigan’s point and mine this morning, and the message of the ages from all the spiritual traditions, is that we are more than our biological selves.

And poetry and music, such as we’ve been graced with this morning, speak to this “more than” in a way that prose and ordinary speech are less likely to do.

Just two examples from today’s poetry:

Emily Dickinson’s plaintive words, “Will there really be a morning?” which we heard sung a short time ago, make no sense in the realm of necessity. But as a poem, the realm of metaphor and symbol, we get it. It is a plaint of the spirit more than of the body, a plaint we have all felt and known. Poetry speaking from and to the heart in a way that prose most often does not.

And Billy Collins’ simple, yet so poignant, poem. It is almost prose-like, a critic might opine, yet it is indeed a poem which lands, because of all that came first (poetically)... lands deep in our hearts with his final lines:

I was as sure as a boy could be
that this useless, worthless thing I wove
out of boredom would be enough to make us even.

A lanyard itself masquerades as necessary. But this lanyard... this lanyard made by this boy... is in any case quite certainly part of the realm of the essential, nourishing to the spirit – of the boy... and one expects of his mother.

So: Of course may we tend to all that is truly necessary in all the practical, daily ways we know.

But may we not neglect the “unnecessary” – but, again at risk of contradiction, *essential*: poetry, music, beauty, gifts given and received, gratitude, God of many names and beyond names, love.

This Mother’s Day and always.

So may it be. Blessed be.

Choral Benediction

Be Like the Bird Text: Victor Hugo; Music: Abbie Betinis