

“Lying Down in Green Pastures”

Preface

Pastor Kelly provided four readings as inspiration for my reflection:

Acts 4: 5-12, the 23 Psalm, 1 John 3: 16-24, and John 10: 11-18, the following are boiled-down messages I have taken away from the Bible edition, The Message.

In Acts we are advised that those in authority may miss the vision of spirit before them. In referring to Jesus it states, “The stone you builders rejected... has become the cornerstone.” The Psalm, this shepherd’s song, says of faith in God, “You have bedded me down in lush meadows...you let me catch my breath and send me in the right direction.” In other, older words, “You maketh me lie down in green pastures.” And “I’m not afraid when you walk at my side.” I John advises, “If you see some brother or sister in need and have the means to do something about it but turn a cold shoulder and do nothing, what happens to God’s love? It disappears.” Finally John addresses the stark truth of spiritual leadership, “The Good Shepherd puts the sheep before himself, sacrifices himself if necessary.”

Reflection

Let us collectively amble as faith community.

Let us suppose we sojourn in Yemen, Syria, or perhaps, if you are timid, to affluent Dubai.

We wander in pale light into the caravanserai,

the desert hostel, and,

like the recorder of the Canterbury Tales on some Arabian night

we hear the woes and theatrical wit of our fellows and dames

and not a one tempers or tames

stories of dramatic lives and travails.

A slight cool breeze blows as we enter,

A gentle spirit of a wind that escorts grudges and regrets away,

Through the portal, beyond the beaded curtain

We are greeted by the wafting essences of cardamom, curries, and cinnamon.

The East Indian host lights a fire, and offers sweet jasmine tea,

his brass brazier like a sacramental censer of sandalwood.

We are with the poets of all ages and stripes,

and when the time is ours,

we become them.

What slice of life do we serve?

A kind of potluck.

In this house our Tuesdays ritualize this

our culinary and conversational bliss.

We are divinely blessed to have guides!

Among ourselves as spiritual strides, we bring comforts

to tease, to acknowledge strife, to consider, to please.

You may have been aided by Homer to the River Styx,

by Dante hailing Virgil to guide us through the Dark Wood,

by Wendell Berry who confronts us from the pasture with the interface of industrial and agrarian worlds.

All the poets are present including William Shakespeare in his funny pants,

Mary Oliver in her pixie cut, all the drinking poets, Rumi,

Robert Frost, who stands apart-cliqued with Bob Dylan, Carl Sandburg, and Leonard Cohen.

All the self-destructive ones and exuberant ones.

Enter our guide today, Walt Whitman, who is in town for National Poetry Month. He removes his wide brimmed straw hat,
setting it on a brass table,
then slowly drops down into the nearest cushion.

“I loafe and invite my soul,

I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.” (1:1-2)

Can you see Mr. Whitman here? Lounging, tranquil, observant?

How do we prod or spur or even cajole

the high priests, teachers, and elders of Acts to this place?

Whitman asks us to ponder, how anyone gets to green pastures-

for the reflection is not always bring or one of ascent.

How different be a triangle from a circle, the cross from the crescent moon, Phoenix from Christ from She Who Watches?

You, before me, stand for tolerance.

It is your hallmark, never an albatross.

Revel in it!

‘Let sleeping dogmas lie!’ some Boston Brahmin shouts.

Not greenER pastures, mind you.

Whitman chuckles and chides mildly.

If it is greener for you on the other side,

the sun must be in your eyes!

Might any poet ask if these safe places...these places of light,

these sanctuaries are closer to dusk or to dawn,

a particular twilight of one’s mind?

Serenity must be bigger than a matter of timing, yes?

These, the deepest and lushest of light

of coral, apricot, and tangerine, of magenta, lilac, and lavender,

and the fathomless azure with its spectral auroras.

How shall we convince the reluctant Samaritan of First John to get to this place,

to be able to face self-sacrifice willingly as Whitman,

the poet nurse of Civil War soldiers,

the carpenter and roustabout?

He waves his arms.

Be kind!

Individuals want but to talk about themselves.

Let them, and be praised as a brilliant conversationalist!

Listen for divinity...for every breath is a sacrament!

Green pastures, for me, is a place where I actively fight stinginess. It is the place of mind of serenity where I give freely of my talents, a place that leads me past some trepidation and fear and psycho-politics as it draws me from my hermitage of the mind, my home within, sequestered from you.

It is a place where I am able to put challenges into perspective. Recently I was "in the principal's office," advising the administrator on a teen with whom we were both working. The sun was shining in and I felt very comfortable. That experience took me back to the very first time I was in that space, back to 1994 when I was an applicant for a teaching job, a number, just another applicant for a coveted job...which I did not get. Hardly a place of comfort then.

A poet with a drawl noted,

The other day a logger was logging,

as was wont his way,

and as oft happens in the woods,

a mechanical challenge faces the man.

Cinched in the log of rounds-to-be was his pinched saw, swaying, taunting his resolve.

And on the Sabbath, no less!

Twice he trudges to the barn for wedges, for axe,

for a bow saw and smaller chainsaw, for humble pie.

The day before orchestrated itself like a practiced ensemble.

The widow maker oak dropped precisely where he wanted it,

Leaning at first with the altered physics,

then thumping to earth.

Returning to today's downed Ponderosa the second time,

he works to focus, to meditate, if you will,

on the first day's work...so smooth, in fact, sublime.

This second day though seems, at first,

to bring only perspiration and frustration.

It was then, counting his blessings

that he grasps the beauty of the moment:

a chance to breathe and savor the beauty of it all.

A half a cup of bar oil finally makes all the difference.

So, this fellow of the woods lets Whitman guide him.

He muses,

a fella could do worse!

Daily drives through the Gorge transport me beyond the places of home and work to, at times, places of sheer tranquility, to exhilarating joys, to points beyond me and my flat-earth

perspectives. Often I am reminded of Bingen Bart's Gorge-famous bumper sticker of the 1980's...

"Attitude is Everything."

Each day's drive, a catalyst to some conjuring.

One day I pondered the mysteries of aging,

passing Cubist, columnar fingers reaching up,

long arthritic fingers that once, perhaps, played Liszt or Segovia.

From green pastures I may acquire permissions

to both fear aging and death AND to be in awe of the Great Beyond-

as with a Rubric's Cube, its many permutations.

Whitman scratches his salt and pepper beard,

looks up as a bird of prey sails across our view,

a turkey vulture, paradox of beauty.

He quips, We of the green pastures

cannot ignore the dangers and desert about us.

If the prophets speak of the geologic and emotional deserts,

they must turn the coin to its other side, at least occasionally.

See, I liken myself to them, not in vanity in the import of my message, but in visage...weather beaten, a loner, a wanderer with a mission.

Call me Bohemian or roustabout!

Point to me, the hobo,

who flits about in this world tasting all the free food at all the gallery openings!

Ahhh, yes, all the free cookies I have consumed

from the Friends of the Library!

It is true, I am fool for a good chocolate chip cookie!

We should all sing of ourselves!

I wish nothing more but that everyone conspiring to listen now
can raise a fist and emphatically say,

'It is I, sir!'

Yes, it is I, we rejoin

for knowing when we catch our visage in the mirror
we glimpse divinity.

When we espy a child exhilarated by the wind rushing through her hair, gliding on the tree
swing

or the smile upon the widow's face

from the fiddle duet whose notes of harmony fill the room.

Yes, it is I, sir, who revels in the universe and our many blessings and beauties.

It is I!

Whitman reaches for a spent dandelion. He observes,

"All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposes, and luckier." (6:129-130)

"Literary flatulence," scoffs T.S. Elliot, in his Missouri English accent.

Ogden Nash flashes Elliot the 'whatever gesture.'

Whitman plucks a blade of grass, and tauting in hand,

He blows across it, a shrieking whistle.

'Marmot?' I wonder.

'Vociferous Honey Badger, ' he quips. I am not afraid to be simplistic, redundant, myself!

The jays and robins, finches, and chickadees,

all halt their songs for this abrasive squawk!

Each and every one of us is blessed with a song of thyself.

Song of fear, song of anger, song of simple vanities.

Oh, for such regret for one

who doesn't enter a given pasture of green in spring:

but what serpentine routes do we find peace upon new vistas, out of the labyrinth and into meadows?

Isn't the unknown dark,

foreboding with ulcers, lesions, and maggots

that eat the soul, everyone's bedfellow?

Sometimes, kids, you just have to pretend it doesn't hurt!

And like a Greek chorus' strophe

somewhere between jeer and cheer,

the cowboy poets shout, "Walk it off, cowboy!"

'Ha!' laughs our lounging American poet. He pokes a dozen times or so on his Smart Phone and the melody, "Don't Worry, Be Happy" plays. He sings along in a slapstickish Jamaican accent,

"In every life we have some trouble

When you worry you make it double

Don't worry, be happy." (Bobby McFerrin)

Kahlil Gibran, Hermann Hesse, and Ezra Pound pick up maracas,

hand drum, and cowbell. Ho Chi Mihn strikes a triangle.

Our Captain sighs, smiling, then continues impromptu,

It's not fixation or elation

or even simple expectation.

You can't leave a broken heart from that station.

Sir, feel your pain. Feel your life!
When you seek, but you are bound
and the answer cannot be found,
Don't fret it or regret it.
It's the journey; that's the thing.
our road's a constant blessing!
Don't worry, be happy.

Whitman gazes about the room and nods.

Peace of mind demands a certain degree of apathy.

He tunes grave and rises,

“I play not marches for accepted victors only, I play marches
for conquer'd and slain persons.

Have you heard that it was good to gain the day?

I also say it is good to fall, battles are lost in the same spirit in
which they are won.” 18: 1-3

Agreed, piped up Yevneshenko.

While travel makes for a good tutor,
failure is our university.

My pin ball of concentration caroms and careens:

Closed gates closed.

That is my mind at times,

the aural cacophony of dissonance, rejection.

Devoid of tranquil, metrical rhymes that are acceptance.

How did Tommy do it?!?

That deaf, dumb, and blind kid?!?

As when we learned to ride the bicycle,
from grueling cerebral exercising and poorly fighting gravity
toward physical divinity, gleefully, wind in our eyes!

Of all the anxieties I can muster:

dark parking garages, the contagion flu,
and embarrassing pompous self-bluster,
all the pain I feel is my due,
each one invitations, welcoming stupas,
temples full of mirrors and windows,
that I may see myself in true light, diffused,
pixelated as it is in prisms,
so I am liberated to act on behalf of the commonweal.

Here's a fork in the path, two roads diverging,

And Berry strolls over and nudges Frost,

Smiling at the phrase lifting.

Is it the quest for the greenest pasture
or breathing deeply in the tall grass in which we stand,
and choosing to lie supine?

A love supreme? Agape?

We are here now and **if** be the secret of life:

comfortable shoes

or weekly nettie pots

or walks around the periphery of the pasture

or a fine chianti

or daily yoga,

We have a pasture here now, and it **IS** green!

Whitman rises to his tip toes,

sips his jasmine tea,

and scans the lot of us:

You must **not** let the misguided high priests rest on the dark laurels of deceit!

You are **obligated** to seek them out, throwing over tables if need be. You are their saviors! Rise to your feet!

Your passion of conviction is a beacon. Guide them beyond the oligarchy of whims and terror!

Take the green pastures with you as bearer,

giving freely the sacrifice of your sharing is tangible stuff-

is guiding light enough.