

A Secular Epiphany?

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Today is the twelfth day of Christmas, the feast day of the Epiphany. On this day, somewhere between a fourth and fifth of the world's population is celebrating an essential of their faith: the manifestation of the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth, and the revelation of what they believe is the true, Trinitarian nature of God; three beings in one divine essence. In the eastern, or Orthodox Christian world, the feast day focuses on the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River, where some of the gospel writers attest that three divine persons were manifest in a single event: the god-man standing in the swirling waters of the river, the divine voice of God issuing from the heavens, the holy spirit descending from the skies like a dove.

For their part, Western Christians, Catholic and Protestant, venerate the revelation of the divine in Jesus by focusing on the story of the three wise men as recorded in the gospel of Matthew. For them, the magi symbolically represent all the gentile nations of the world standing in that barn in Bethlehem; where, miraculously, a male child, the son of a Jewish mother, embodied the dream of godliness manifest in this world: the unique son of god, saviour of the human family, the second person of the Trinity.

Now I dwell on this for a couple of reasons. First, I think it just makes good, pragmatic sense to know about the beliefs of others. So much of human culture, including politics, domestic life, and civil society, has been expressly formed by, wrestles with, and articulates religious belief and practice in myriad ways. If I want to be an even modestly well-informed and effective citizen and neighbour, knowing something, even a thumbnail sketch, about what others believe, and how and when they express their beliefs, seems prudent and timely. As well, historically, Unitarians pioneered in the study of comparative religions, and for decades we have intentionally explored the content and practice of other faiths in the setting of children's and adult religious education programs believing that it would enhance the depth of our own faith and build bridges of understanding, respect and tolerance between faith communities.

But more than that, there is wisdom in that line in the Robert Frost poem that goes: "good fences make good neighbors." As much as I might know and respect the beliefs of the Christian world manifest in humble churches and mighty cathedrals on this Epiphany Sunday, with all due respect, I don't share them. I am a Unitarian, not a Trinitarian. I no longer resonate to, nor can I affirm the doctrines and sensibilities of supernatural religious traditions. While I may keenly feel to this day the loss of what was once the deep assurance of the reality of a personal god; the loss, too, of the assurance in that whole, grand, doctrinal narrative edifice of creation, revelation and redemption, it is the keen pain that comes (at least for me), that comes from *the pain of growth*. I mean no condescension here, in quoting from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13: Listen! "For now [I] see in a glass darkly, but *then* face to face. Now I know in part; *then* I shall understand fully."

These are enigmatic lines, words written honestly, that attest, on the one hand, to Paul's sense of humility about what he knows or what can be known; and on the other, to his confidence that *all will be known* and understood. But the conditions of that knowledge, for him, are predicated in a faith that presumes that the origin of all things lies *beyond* nature, and that the ultimate, redemptive end of creation resides in its *transcendent* glorification beyond mundane time and space; *that* is what is at the heart of Epiphany Sunday. Though seemingly clothed in mere matter and transient flesh, though weighed down with sorrow and acquainted with grief, many, many believe that we come into this life "trailing clouds of glory" or so Wordsworth tells us, "trailing clouds of glory do we come, from God, who is our home." It is as though this world and its creatures, low and high, animate and inanimate, aren't enough; and instead, can only be known, seen, and truly esteemed if their source, ground, and goal is transcendently sublime; that our

travails and struggles will ultimately be assuaged, and that the evil in this world will be seen to make sense only by means of finding their place somewhere fittingly in the divine epic.

But for those of us who can no longer believe that way, and yet who also, “see in a glass darkly, and who know in part...” is it possible to experience epiphanies in this life; those sudden and important manifestations, realizations, and revealings, whereby we too will see “face-to-face” and understand more fully? Are secular epiphanies, is non-theistic enchantment possible, and if so, so what? As well, if they are within our reach, and can be part of our experience, how are they conveyed? How can we enable such encounters to take place?

First, by affirming that a non-theistic naturalism can inspire a sense of wonder, value, awe, and enchantment for the world. Many, both in religious and scientific communities believe this can't be so. For example, Max Weber, the German sociologist insisted in a famous and incredibly influential essay called “Science as a Vocation,” written in 1918, that the methods and impersonality of a discipline like science contributes to the “disenchantment of the world”; that science expels mystery, meaning, and consolation. Weber’s “narrative of disenchantment” leaves only two options: “either a value laden world infused with transcendental meaning,” or an amoral, coldly instrumental world from which all “value is drained as it is subjected to scientific investigation.” (see George Levine, *Darwin Loves You: Natural Selection and the Re-Enchantment of the World*, 2006, 23, 33. Hereafter: Levine) And when those in the scientific community reduce the whole process and expression of natural selection to an algorithm, a “metaphor for mindless and mechanical activity,” of the world as a machine, it seems that Weber’s disenchantment theory is correct.

But that’s not the whole story, and by no means. Consider this statement of Nobel Prize physicist and atheist Steven Weinberg, most of whose family was murdered during the Holocaust. Many may be familiar with the first rather gloomy sentence, fewer with what he said next: “The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless,” Weinberg said. And yet, “I have to admit that sometimes nature is more beautiful than is strictly necessary.” Far from reducing nature to a machine, of emptying it out of meaning, or of moments and experiences shot through with awe and value, I want to cite two sources that profoundly affirm the possibility and experience of enchantment through the medium of a non-theistic naturalism. The first is Charles Darwin, the second is Sylvia Plath.

Both Darwin and Plath were intimately associated with the Unitarian world through family connections, church attendance and sensibility. Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, published in 1859, spectacularly affronted the god-filled Victorian imagination. Through one long argument, buttressed by overwhelming, close observation of the natural world, by substituting the workings of chance for intelligent design, Darwin credibly, compellingly overthrew belief in a special, transcendent creation. He demonstrated that species, including our own, mutate into new forms, and inconclusive branches in the relentless burgeoning tree of evolution. Paradise was replaced with the primordial oceans and the advent of life from the simplest, most lowly chemical building blocks. Human beings had not fallen from grace but risen from the swamps. “No shadow of reason,” he wrote, “can be assigned for the belief that variations, alike in nature and the result of the same general laws, which have been the ground-work through natural selection of the formation of the most perfectly adapted animals in the world, man included, were intentionally and specially guided”; so much for human exceptionalism and transcendent providential design! This sounds like disenchantment with a vengeance.

But this is the same Darwin who closed the *Origin of Species* with the following statement: “There is a grandeur in this view of life, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.” Darwin’s deeply felt wonder and amazement, his feeling for life’s grandeur was dearly achieved through patient, sympathetic, imaginative, and close observation. Just one example: His books on barnacles, of which he was world’s pre-eminent expert, have been described as

“the most dry of the texts that he would ever write” (Levine, 217) and yet, even here, wonder, exuberance, and excitement overtake him. Here’s an abbreviated quote:

As I am summing up the singularity of the phenomenon here presented, I will allude to the marvelous assemblage of beings seen by me within the sac of an *Ibla quadrivalis*,--namely, an old and young male, both minute, worm-like destitute of a capitulum, with a great mouth, and rudimentary thorax and limbs, attached to each other, and to the hermaphrodite, which latter is utterly different in appearance and structure; secondly, the four or five, free, boat shaped larvae, with their curiously prehensile antennae...*(this exercise in close description goes on for many lines, that conclude)* what diverse beings, with scarcely anything in common, and yet all belonging to the same species! (quoted in Levine, 217-18).

What I want us to attend to here is the intensity, precision, and excitement of the technical language—they testify to a scientist who finds in the world’s least creatures grounds for wonder. This brings me back to the reading from Darwin with which I began these remarks. “All living things,” he said, are “the descendents of one common progenitor,” having developed “from simple variability.... To consider the subject under this point of view is enough to strike one dumb with amazement.”

What’s most striking to me here, and you find it over and over again in Darwin, and that is his recognition of the sublime in the most simple, the common, the overlooked; that epiphanies can come our way in the midst of the secular, the natural, the ordinary. When was the last time we looked really closely and discovered what Darwin called the “marvelous, diverse assemblage of beings in a single sac of a single barnacle”? Wonder can overtake us in such close observation. Wonder, awe and reverence as well when we consider and recognize that we are not the product of a special providence, or stand above and a part from nature, not that we’re the crown of creation; but rather, re-enchantment can flow from a “reverse sublimity” (Levine), from a recognition of the affinities we share with all beings, beings that flower on one great, common tree of life; that we can imagine and perceive our humanity as on a single, biological continuum with all living things.

Let us turn now to the Sylvia Plath poem printed in the *Sunday Unitarian* and read it together: “Black Rook in Rainy Weather.”.....

In a letter Plath wrote to her mother, she stated that she believed in “the impersonal laws of science as a god of sorts;” and in a religion course she wrote a paper on Unitarianism where she identified herself as an “agnostic humanist.” In “Black Rook in Rainy Weather” those impersonal laws are at work, and her agnosticism is evident: she doesn’t “expect a miracle;” she doesn’t seek “some design” or “portent” from “the mute sky” or the “dull, ruinous landscape.” And yet, and yet...like the physicist Steven Weinberg and the naturalist Charles Darwin, Plath’s close attention to that “wet black rook,” to “kitchen table [and] chair,” even to the “desultory weather” and “this season of fatiue” yields the recognition “that sometimes nature is more beautiful than is strictly necessary” (Weinberg); that it can, at moments, quietly overflow with a superabundance of meaning and luminous being that invites us to wait again for the “rare, random descent” of “whatever angel may choose to flare suddenly” by our side.

There’s something else I want to say about the poem. While I love reading poetry, I am not the best of readers. I aim primarily at getting the meaning, the gist of the thing, and at scanning or reading the lines so they make sense. But thanks to my friend Mark Baker, he alerted me to something else going on in “The Black Rook...” that I hadn’t noticed at all. Each line of each stanza ends where it does for a reason. It’s not obvious, but look closely, the way Darwin looked at a barnacle. The whole poem has an “*interlocking rhyme*” scheme. That is, a word unrhymed in the first stanza is linked internally to words rhymed in the following stanzas to create a continuing pattern through the whole poem. (Compare first lines: 1 “there,” 2 “fire,” 3 “desire,” 4 “chair,” etc.. Second lines: 1 “rook,” 2 “seek” 4 “took” etc.) They’re not exact, but slant, or

near rhymes that approximate the sound from the preceding stanza. The effect, for me, when I discovered it was an “ah ha!” moment; a revealing, a quiet, but very satisfying epiphany.

Discovering the interlocking rhyme scheme in “The Black Rook...” enhanced my pleasure in reading it; the joy in seeing similarity in dissimilarity, likeness in difference. By subtly linking sound, Plath also weaves thought and feeling through and among the stanzas, pulling our mind back from line’s end to the lines which preceded it, and thus helps to convey more powerfully her private vision of longing, of miracle, of superabundance of meaning, in spite of “the mute sky” and “ruinous landscape.”

Epiphanies cannot save us. They cannot guarantee that harm will not come our way. The death of Darwin’s dear 10 year daughter Annie struck him deeply. It was a cruel, grievous loss. And while he was surrounded by a loving family and devoted colleagues and friends, he was also roundly reviled in public press and pulpit. He knew the consequences of his theory, the revolutionary impact they would have on traditional belief about god, scripture, causation and providence. He wrote early on as he was developing his theory of natural selection that it was “like confessing a murder”; the prospect of publishing it filled him with dread, and was so stressful that it broke his health.

Epiphanies cannot assure us that those we love will stay true, or that our days and nights will not be haunted by depression. Ask Sylvia Plath. Would that the interval between her long wait for the angel had not been so rare, so random; that it would have more generously poured out its incandescent, hallowing light.

If they can neither guarantee salvation nor avert harm, we may be left with a big SO WHAT? And here I want to end. Reading Darwin and Plath, with their moments of epiphany, encourages me to see Nature, though perhaps divested of a personal god and providential design, as a source of deep moral and aesthetic value. In a world “gone slightly mad in its quest for transcendental consolation” (Levine, 30) their close, sympathetic reading of the book of nature seeks to reignite in us a sense of wonder and respect for all things inanimate and living; as such, it is a compelling plea for a vision that is emotionally and ethically engaged.

The world is a tough and painfully fragile place; all the more reason to see ourselves as part of a great continuum, as woven into that interdependent web of all existence. Intellect alone is not enough; humility and sympathetic imagination, the kind that can feel its way beyond ego, a feeling to and for others is also an essential trait we have inherited, a trait crucial if we are to have a future. Secular epiphanies argue for an affective, responsible public engagement with the world; a world overwhelmed with inhumanity and catastrophe, but full of meaning, teeming with life and new life. May we see, think, and feel it; and live to make it so.