

Epiphanies of Heart and Mind

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Thomas Strauss

Did the beauty of the world ever enter your body, your awareness, so fully that you wanted to cry?

I've been worrying a lot about my mother lately. This week will mark the one year anniversary of my father's death...and my mom has been living alone for the first time in her life. Rural Wisconsin has seen a lot of snow this winter, and I worry about my mom slipping on the ice, or being snowed in for days with no one to talk to.

I spoke with her on the phone the other day after one of these wet flaky snowstorms we've been having. And she said she had been out shoveling. Of course, at her age, she shouldn't be out shoveling and I told her as much. "But, I just love to get outside," she said..."The snow was so beautiful, I almost cried!"

I can just see my mom, out on her isolated hilltop leaning on her shovel...all 84 years of her life captured in that moment of joy!

I use the word epiphany this morning to refer to this kind of awareness- this kind of happiness...those moments when, in spite of the dangers and sadness and evil in this life...the beauty and joy shine through...and we remember that we were born for this.

When they happen, these moments feel like a miracle.

But really, they are quite common.

I love Ted Kooser's poem "Gyroscope" – can't most of us remember the fascination of holding a gyroscope...stretching the string between our hands, trying to hold on to the spinning, wobbling intricate "small world", as Kooser calls it.

As poet Wislawa Szymborska says...A commonplace miracle is precisely that so many commonplace miracles happen.

Epiphanies occur most often at the intersection of two seemingly disparate realities. The sad loneliness of a grieving year and the ethereal beauty of a blanket of snow.

The play of a child, controlling an aspect of physics.

The intersection is often between human emotion and the natural and physical world. When we humans pay attention to the forces of nature- in all their power and beauty and creativity...we feel an awakening...a flash of insight, something akin to grace.

Poets, theologians and scientists have been writing and raving about it for generations. From Galileo to Darwin, to Emily Dickenson, to Thomas Berry to NASA.

Science and religion have been linked.

Personally, my favorite sciences are geology and astronomy...and when I take the time to notice...the link to religion and spirituality is clear and immediate.

Take rocks. Quarries, shorelines, cliff edges...all fascinating...all calling me to notice, to come closer...all impossible not to touch, to photograph, to ponder. Notice the light as it moves across the canyon wall. Notice the heft and coolness of that stone. Notice the waves still chipping away, reducing, sculpting the rock. Wow! A miracle or not a miracle?

And when I don't go seeking my own miracle...I turn to the poets and writers to take me there. Who can better create intersections of heart and mind...of loss and beauty, of science and religion.

My favorite poet of rocks is A.R. Ammons. Though most of his work is not so easy to read aloud...I do recommend him to any rock or wind lovers.

Here is one: "Bees Stopped"

Bees stopped on the rock

And rubbed their headparts and wings

Rested then flew on:

Ants ran over the whitish greenish reddish

Plants that grow flat on rocks

And people never see

Because nothing should grow on rocks:

I looked out over the lake

And beyond to the hills and trees

And nothing was moving

So I looked closely

Along the lakeside

Under the old leaves or rushes

And around clumps of drygrass

And life was everywhere

So I went on sometimes whistling

So this is the point of ordinary miracle...this is the point of epiphany and tears...this awareness and the awe of it..."And life was everywhere"!

Yes, this is the point of religion and science- and life was/is everywhere. And we can go on whistling.

We are meant to reverence life...and to save life.

Epiphany, miracle and tears matter because they stir reverence and a sense of mission...in the face of the beauty of snow or rock or starlight...what is our sacred responsibility?

Is it not to nurture life? Is it not to save the earth?

The experience of a lifetime of epiphanies, one after the other, culminates in wisdom. If we open to moments of ordinary miracles...common epiphanies, if we pay attention and open our minds and hearts...we will become wise enough to join with all people who loving rocks and trees and stars and oceans and children...want to save the earth.

More orthodox religious people sometimes think that God is the redeemer- but we liberal religionists know that it is up to us.

The world is in our hands. ..waiting to be healed, its divine sparks waiting to be discovered, held and transformed.

Life is everywhere and all life is holy. This I believe.

Annie Dillard reminds us that ours is a planet sown in beings. And we humans, capable of epiphanies of mind and heart...we living on this planet..."while we breathe, we open time like a path in the grass."

Life is everywhere, but this is all there is.

The ancient Hindu Epic the Mahabharata (Ma ha bhaar a ta) says "of all the world's wonders, which is the most wonderful?

"That no man, though he sees others dying all around him, believes that he himself will die."

According to Dillard, While we breathe, we open time like a path in the grass and it closes behind us as we move forward...until at last, we like all beings...die.

Perhaps this is what miracle, tears and wonder and epiphany teach us...Life is precious and this is the only time we have.

If we allow the beauty of the world to enter our body, and acknowledge its holiness...if we embrace our sacred responsibility to save the world...then now is the time to begin.

And we cannot do it alone. We nature lovers, we scientists, we book lovers, we loners ...we yearn for retreat...for a room of our own, for a study, for time to think.

But here we all are choosing community...needing companions on the journey...needing to belong....needing a little help from our friends...reaching out to one another. Not wanting nature to play to an empty house.

Geology and astronomy remind us of how small we each are...and yes, we know that we too will die...but this is not disheartening...it is a miracle....we are here, we are here now, and this is a blessing. It could have been otherwise.

So, what are we going to do with our one precious life?

How will we fulfill our sacred responsibility?

To be honest, I don't know. I don't know for you and I'm not even sure for myself...what am I going to do with my one precious life?

It's probably not what we think it is.

We open time like a path in the grass while we wait for the epiphany of heart or mind to show us how we can help to save the earth...how we can discern the holy and heal our relationships.

And while we wait...we live...surrounded by beauty and by suffering.

What to do.

Dillard tells of an encounter as she traveled in the middle east..."In Cana lived a Palestinian merchant who gave wine to all comers. "Wine for everyone, he cried into the street. "on the house." He wore an open jacket and a blue shirt buttoned to the top.

He brandished a silver tray full of tiny wineglasses. My friends would not enter his shop. They thought it was a trick. It was a trick: put a man through life for sixty years and he is generous to strangers.

I took a glass of red wine from the silver tray and drank it down.

In my ordinary life, I don't drink wine. Fine: This man was supposed to be selling souvenirs to tourists, which he was not doing either. We ignored his merchandise. Leaning in his open doorway, we talked; we traded cigarettes and smoked.

Across the steep street we saw the church at Cana, built where John's gospel says Christ turned water into wine for a wedding. Like 130,000 other Palestinians in the Galilee, this shopkeeper was a Christian. His two brothers were priests, as it happened; his two sisters were nuns. His bit was giving away wine.

He was content to look me in the eye and converse about the world. He understood that grand coincidence brought us together, upright and within earshot, in this flickering generation of human life on this planet- common language or not, sale or no sale- and therefore to mark the occasion we might as well have a little cigarette.

Epiphanies and miracles are not only common and ordinary...but they are often unassuming...seemingly small.

How can we know what might save the world...how might we at least, redeem a small part of it.

How do we know what we are meant to do with this one precious life?

All I'm saying is be aware, pay attention, reach out...let beauty fill you...do not be afraid.

Look someone in the eye and converse about the world...you never know.

And remember you were born for this ...for tears and joy and connection. Remember- all life is holy. Look around, we are in the midst of a miracle fair.

Amen/Blessed BE