

Why Poetry in Seminary? And Why a Poetry Blog at Asbury?

In 1862, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a pastor, contributed an essay in the Atlantic Monthly magazine. He wrote a letter of encouragement and advice to the young writers of America. Shortly following, he received in the mail a letter containing four poems and a humble question.

“Mr. Higginson, --Are you too deeply occupied to say if my verse is alive? The mind is so near itself it cannot see distinctly, and I have none to ask. Should you think it breathed, and had you the leisure to tell me, I should feel quick gratitude.”

The letter was postmarked from Amherst, Massachusetts. Containing scant punctuation, the author used dashes to delineate the ideas. There was no signature, only a small card with a name written lightly in pencil.

The name was Emily Dickenson.

Many speculate the initial correspondence between Higginson and Dickenson, which would continue consistently for years following, gave her the courage needed to become a real poet and write what she called her “letter to the world.”

In their ensuing correspondence, which lasted throughout the next decade and included personal meetings, Higginson resisted the temptation to take her to task on the rules, traditions and conventions of poetry. He instead offered a reflective quality of encouragement, taking care to nurture the relationship, often referring her to other great poets of the day. The signature of her letters henceforth read, “Your Scholar.”

In one of her letters she writes, “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?” (pp.19-20)

By the time of her death twenty-four years later, though unpublished and unknown, she penned 1,775 poems. Her work was largely anonymous. Over a century later Emily Dickenson ranks as one of the most prolific poets in American History. (Selected Poems & Letters of Emily Dickinson. Ed. Robert N. Linscott. Doubleday. New York. 1959. 1-24)

The time has come for pastors to once again call forth and encourage poets. Poetry is a fragile craft and poets die a thousand deaths from timidity and discouragement. Poetry lives in the place of travail and thrives in the realm of mystery. We must call forth our poets and take time to declare their verse “alive.”

Though I have written poetry all my life, seasons of hardship most often birth new works. The first year of law school offered such a season. I remember sharing a fresh poem with an acquaintance who had abandoned the law for a masters in English. After a cursory

glance, he excoriated my work, relegating me a hack. It took years to regain the confidence to write and share again.

One of the all time greatest movie moments occurred in the film, *The Dead Poet's Society*. You undoubtedly remember it. Professor Keating requests a student to read the opening paragraph of the preface entitled, "Understanding Poetry." Nothing short of the script can do it justice.

NEIL: Understanding Poetry, by Dr. J. Evans Pritchard, Ph.D. To fully understand poetry, we must first be fluent with its meter, rhyme, and figures of speech. Then ask two questions: One, how artfully has the objective of the poem been rendered, and two, how important is that objective. Question one rates the poem's perfection, question two rates its importance. And once these questions have been answered, determining a poem's greatest becomes a relatively simple matter.

Keating gets up from his desk and prepares to draw on the chalk board.

NEIL: If the poem's score for perfection is plotted along the horizontal of a graph, and its importance is plotted on the vertical, then calculating the total area of the poem yields the measure of its greatness.

Keating draws a corresponding graph on the board and the students dutifully copy it down.

NEIL: A sonnet by Byron may score high on the vertical, but only average on the horizontal. A Shakespearean sonnet, on the other hand, would score high both horizontally and vertically, yielding a massive total area, thereby revealing the poem to be truly great. As you proceed through the poetry in this book, practice this rating method. As your ability to evaluate poems in this matter grows, so will - so will your enjoyment and understanding of poetry.

Neil sets the book down and takes off his glasses. The student sitting across from him is discretely trying to eat. Keating turns away from

the chalkboard with a smile.

KEATING

Excrement. That's what I think of Mr. J.
Evans Pritchard. We're not laying pipe,
we're talking about poetry.

Cameron looks down at the graph he copied into his notes and quickly scribbles it out.

KEATING

I mean, how can you describe poetry like
American Bandstand? I like Byron, I give
him a 42, but I can't dance to it.

Charlie suddenly appear to become interested in the class.

KEATING

Now I want you to rip out that page.

The students look at Keating as if he has just gone mad.

KEATING

Go on, rip out the entire page. You heard
me, rip it out. Rip it out!

Charlie looks around at the others. He then looks down at his own notes, which consists of drawing breasts.

KEATING

Go on, rip it out.

Charlie rips the page out and holds it up.

KEATING

Thank you Mr. Dalton. Gentlemen, tell you
what, don't just tear out that page, tear
out the entire introduction. I want it
gone, history. Leave nothing of it. Rip
it out. Rip! Begone J. Evans Pritchard,
Ph.D. Rip, shred, tear. Rip it out. I
want to hear nothing but ripping of Mr.
Pritchard.

Meeks looks around reluctantly and then finally begins tearing out pages.

KEATING

We'll perforate it, put it on a roll.

KEATING

Keep ripping gentlemen. This is a battle,
a war. And the casualties could be your
hearts and souls.

Keating holds out the basket to Charlie who spits out a wad of paper.

KEATING

Thank you Mr. Dalton. Armies of academics
going forward, measuring poetry. No, we
will not have that here. No more of Mr.
J. Evans Pritchard. Now in my class you
will learn to think for yourselves again.
You will learn to savor words and language.
No matter what anybody tells you, words and
ideas can change the world. I see that look
in Mr. Pitt's eye, like nineteenth century
literature has nothing to do with going to
business school or medical school. Right?
Maybe. Mr. Hopkins, you may agree with him,
thinking "Yes, we should simply study our
Mr. Pritchard and learn our rhyme and meter
and go quietly about the business of
achieving other ambitions." I have a little
secret for ya. Huddle up. Huddle up!

The boys get up from their seats and gather around Keating in the center
of the class.

KEATING

We don't read and write poetry because
it's cute. We read and write poetry
because we are members of the human race.
And the human race is filled with passion.
Medicine, law, business, engineering,
these are all noble pursuits, and necessary
to sustain life. But poetry, beauty,
romance, love, these are what we stay alive
for. To quote from Whitman: "O me, o life
of the questions of these recurring, of the
endless trains of the faithless, of cities
filled with the foolish. What good amid
these, o me, o life? Answer: that you are
here. That life exists, and identity.
That the powerful play goes on, and you
may contribute a verse. That the powerful
play goes on and you may contribute a verse.

Keating looks up at Todd.

KEATING

What will your verse be?

Poets must be encouraged for with a mere handful of words they subvert the world order. Is it any wonder our poets are the most dangerous liaisons of the Kingdom? Poets take words to their highest power. Like chemists experimenting in the lab, poets combine words into combusting compositions. Theologians laboriously wrestle with words to describe, define and delineate the qualities and character of God. Poets train words to dance in the declaration of God's glory. They craft cathedrals with words. And when poems burst into song the world joins the dance.

In general, academics scorn poets. Scholars who study in the theological tradition of Wesley remember our roots lie in songs. The ArTS Council (Artistic Response to Theological Study) of Asbury Theological Seminary is pleased to launch this blog as an intentional effort to call forth and encourage artistry as a way of doing theology.

So may this web log become a fertile community, like a green pasture beside still waters, where friends muster the audacity to declare themselves poets and artists and inhale the courage to create beautiful theology.

AND SO OUR FATHER, CALL FORTH YOUR POETS AND RELEASE IN THEM THE DANGEROUS VERSE OF THE KINGDOM— WORDS WOVEN TOGETHER MAKING US SEE REALITIES YET TO BE AND INSPIRING US TO WALK INTO THEM AS THOUGH THEY ARE. IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST,, A MEN.

What will your verse be?

John David (J.D.) Walt, Jr.
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Dean of the Chapel
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