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REFLECTIONS

On Being Bolstered by Small Moments between Perpetual Crises

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When I taught high school English in California another lifetime ago, I began the new year with my juniors in American Literature by having them read and discuss Czeslaw Milosz' s poem "Gift" :

A day so happy.
Fog lifted early, I worked in the garden.
Hummingbirds were stopping over honeysuckle flowers.
There was no thing on earth I wanted to possess.
I knew no one worth my envying him.
Whatever evil I had suffered, I forgot.
To think that once I was the same man did not embarrass me.
In my body I felt no pain.
When straightening up, I saw the blue sea and sails.

After our discussion, I would ask students to create their own model poems, using Milosz' s first line exactly, but then crafting a series of simple declarative observations about fond memories from their summer vacations just ended. This simple activity eased students into another nine months of school, and the study of literature specifically, by allowing them to reflect upon, bring into the classroom, and share with others those moments that mattered to them from their summertime, non-academic lives. Students would share their poems with excitement. Everyone had something to write about, and now everyone was amazed to learn (my subversive pedagogical plan) that they could actually write poetry—on the first day of class!

Part of the message I hoped to convey was that I recognized them as whole persons with lives outside the formal classroom. As obvious and as simple as this may seem to thoughtful educators, it is sometimes necessary to remind ourselves as well that there is more to us when we walk through the university classroom door than the pedagogue, scholar, and committee member we were hired to be. Like Milosz, we are people who putter in gardens, who wake with aches and pains, who are too often burdened by both by our possessions and our pasts, who seek the forgiveness of others and of ourselves. And we are people, too, who are and must be able to find unexpected moments of quiet joy and contentment within the chaos of our academic careers. These small, quiet, joyful moments are always gifts.

This fall, as the air at last starts to cool, at the beginning of another hectic school year that I now understand will be the norm for the rest of my university career, I have found myself thinking about this Milosz poem again. When I taught “Gift” to my fresh-faced juniors at San Mateo High School, I was aware that most of them would probably not relate fully to the tone of the poem, which is calmly reflective, but beneath the surface lie allusions to a deep and complex history that includes the pain and loss of political upheaval and exile. To most of my elastic, young, middle-class students, waking up feeling no pain in their bodies was a matter of course, and certainly nothing to write a poem about. Even I did not directly relate to the experiences Milosz emphasizes in offering up this moment of gratitude for the beauty of the ordinary. Yet the simple images and contemplative feeling of the poem moved me nevertheless, and somehow I understood that the speaker in this poem has lived a life of struggle and difficulty alongside profound satisfaction and connection. I had a sense that such a life was a meaningful life, and I both hoped to be able to live such a life and figured that even if I did not, it would be good in the years to come to be able to straighten up without pain and (because I was living in San Francisco then) to see the blue Pacific Ocean on the horizon.

My Bay Area high school teaching days are now fifteen years and over 2,800 miles away. Why am I thinking of Milosz so powerfully this fall, as I pick the last of the summer tomatoes and basil in our Laurinburg, North Carolina, community garden plot, already feeling a mounting wave of stress arising from the slew of new classes, meetings, and students facing me this semester? It occurs to me that this poem, which once seemed in the distance of my life as a thirty-something high school teacher, is now a place I have come to inhabit as a fifty-something university professor. Age is definitely part of this, but it is also the experiences and understandings that come with age and that are more easily processed—for me, at least—during my down times from teaching and the rest of the flurry of activities of the academic year. It is during my summer break, especially, when I am able to replenish myself, and to put into perspective the struggles and challenges—the “evils I [have] suffered,” as Milosz puts it—of the school year past, and of my life in general, by appreciating the gifts of summer (those glorious tomatoes, that luxuriant basil) and pledging once again to retain my connection to those gifts as I dive into the inevitable tumult of the new school year. Of those summer gifts, the time to read, write, reflect, and reconnect with the people I love and with the natural world, form my baseline. The daily flow includes growing garden plants and canning them, walking my spotted dog on sandy red earth roads, taking road trips, and laughing with friends I am finally able to visit again.

It is very easy during the school year, and beyond it, to focus on the wars now being waged against higher education through assaults on academic freedom, massive budget cuts, the vagaries of policy makers and administrators, and leadership that somehow maintains that educating critical thinkers in the liberal arts is a waste of time if there is not an immediate, visible, and quantifiable translation of college degrees into “productive” jobs, whatever that means these days. As North Carolina governor Pat McCrory stated in a now-

infamous interview, his priority is to ensure that North Carolina funding for education is “not based on how many butts [are] in seats but how many of those butts can get jobs.” Frankly, I do not think most employers look to hire “butts” at all, but instead aim to hire whole people with a range of skills and abilities, one of which might even be writing a poem, and which certainly include thinking critically and expansively during this very precarious historical period. Unfortunately, there are plenty of folks who share McCrory’s attitude, and this obviously has not helped the state of higher education—or public education at any level—in North Carolina.

Milosz unquestionably saw his share of wrong-headed political leadership as well while living through Tsarist domination in Russia and resisting Nazi ideology in Warsaw. The ways he survived included speaking out, writing—writing poetry always—and, eventually, by making the United States his home. I think about that, about how it is equally important to engage in activism and art (which are frequently the same), to pay attention to politics, and yet also to turn politics off at times so that we might recognize and absorb the immediate joys and gifts that each of us receives. Alongside their various political and cultural critiques, author/activist James Baldwin wrote about love and author/activist bell hooks writes about joy. And Walt Whitman’s anti-war poetry exists in the same universe as his beautifully erotic odes to the sensuality of human bodies.

I think as well of my friend Joe D. Lucero, the 97-year-old Isleta Pueblo elder I visit in New Mexico during the feast day of St. Augustine, who still jokes, prays, sings, shares food, speaks his Tiwa language, dances in his people’s seasonal ceremonies to ensure the vitality of crops, enjoys an occasional glass of wine, and keeps a warm twinkle in his eye and a kind word for everyone. He does this despite having lived through deaths and droughts, land and language loss, and other hardships that have been part of the legacy of his people’s colonization for almost a century. From such people—artists, activists, resisters, survivors—I draw strength, I take heart, I have hope, and I keep going. In the classroom, I encourage my students along a similar path. From such people I can see that current political regimes, while capable of doing great damage that will need undoing in the future, are nevertheless temporary and will pass.

The gifts of reflection and rejuvenation that I bring with me into fall semester include memories of thunderstorms and the ecstasy of frogsong afterwards, the verdant greens and fresh blueberries of North Carolina, reading good books, hanging out at the pool with friends, watching fireflies by the river, and traveling back to the Pacific Ocean of Milosz’s poem to once again breathe in the cold wind. Thinking of these moments now, I remember many days so happy, and I know more will come. As summer recedes in the distance and the whirl of a new school year accelerates, I will try to make that day so happy be today, tomorrow, and the day after that. It will not always work, but I will try. And I will try to help my students to do the same.