

Editor's Note: Almost two years ago I asked Chris Anderson for his permission to reprint his poem, "[Blessing](#)," in V-V. It was originally published in *Rattle*. Since then he has been a regular V-V contributor (largely because of my insistent nagging). Chris is an English Professor at Oregon State University and he is a Catholic deacon. But he is no ordinary deacon. (After you read this article you will understand why I say that.) Chris has written poems, prose, homilies, and more. His new book, *Light When It Comes*, a book of short prose pieces, will be published by Eerdmans in November. You can find out more at his new website: www.deaconchrisanderson.com. If you'd like to write to him (as is the tradition here when a reader likes a piece), his email address is anderson7715@msn.com.

Opening Up Malcolm: Poetry as Spiritual Practice

by
Chris Anderson

A few months ago a friend told me a story, about an experience she had in a dissection class, with a cadaver, and as soon as I heard the phrase "opening up Malcolm," I asked if I could turn the story into a poem.

Opening Up Malcolm

Who could have guessed
the cadaver would be someone
she had known
years before, a beloved teacher,
with his grizzled beard
and thinning hair,
or how beautiful he was
when they flipped him over
and slit him open
and the ganglion of nerves
at the base of the spine
spilled out into the air,
the *Cauda Equina*,
a gathering of filaments
for a moment so luminous,
so like pearl,
all the students wept
behind their masks?

This is the little poem I want to start with, as an example, and as I've been thinking about it, I've been thinking that there are, let's say, five ways that it's like a prayer—that it is a prayer—and that the writing of it was a kind of spiritual practice.

First, when you write a poem, as when you pray, you assume that there is great meaning in small and ordinary things.

As a Christian I believe that the world is “charged with the grandeur of God,” as Gerard Manly Hopkins puts it, that because of the Incarnation Christ is lovely in 10,000 places, and so life, too, is a sacred text and prayer is autobiography and everything that happens is significant, especially the small and the ordinary. This is the assumption of the ancient Christian prayer technique called the *examen*, that God speaks to us in our lives and that at the end of each day we pray by reflecting back on our moments of darkness and our moments of light. This is the assumption of the ancient way of reading the Bible called *lectio divina*, “divine reading”, that the stories in scripture speak to us about what’s happening here and now, even to you and to me—that our own seas are being parted--we are being raised.

That’s why I don’t just write about obviously spiritual things, though I often do, but why I often write about my dogs and about birds, about the woods, about dreams.

Secular poets name this mystery in a different way, but the point is that there’s a mystery and that it gets revealed in the concrete, in image, and so people who pray do what poets do. We pay attention, or try to.

This is Walter Burghardt’s definition of prayer: “a long, loving look at the real.”

Second, a prayer like a poem begins with a lump in the throat.

This is what Robert Frost said about poems, that they always begin with a lump in the throat, which is to say that poetry doesn’t begin with ideas but with the wordless, oddly enough, begins and ends with something that can never be put into words but only pointed at.

I’m a Catholic deacon, ordained to hatch, match and dispatch--baptize, marry, and bury. I wear a collar sometimes and vestments sometimes, and I preach and serve at mass, and I visit the sick and do retreats. But as a Catholic poet I don’t walk around with a Catholic doctrine in my head looking for things to illustrate it. I begin with an image. I begin with this feeling of falling in love, with some moment that has moved me somehow, and I never exactly know what it means.

Looking at “Opening Up Malcolm” now I can see that once again I’ve written about something beautiful hidden in the body and in our ordinary life, something spiritual, I guess, and people are weeping behind their “masks,” behind their false selves, and death is a “teacher,” as this body is teacher. I can see all kinds of meanings. But I wasn’t thinking of those meanings as I was writing, and there’s not just one meaning, and you might interpret the poem differently than I do, and there’s always something in a poem, even a mediocre poem, that can’t be translated out. The interpretation is always secondary, the poem is closer to the mystery, and this is the key to understanding what Christian and Jewish tradition has always seen as the secondary role of theology and doctrine. All theology, David Tracy says, proclaims its “intrinsic inadequacy,” and that’s not just a new idea. “Of course we don’t know what we’re talking about,” Augustine said

in the fourth century. “If we knew what we were talking about we wouldn’t be talking about God.” The whole point of doctrine is to keep insisting that there’s something beyond human understanding.

As George Dennis O’Brien puts it, what the angels announced above the stable in Bethlehem wasn’t a topic for conversation.

Third, in prayer as in poetry we both lose ourselves and find ourselves.

My mind wanders a lot when I try to pray. I get bogged down in my own inner gossip, my own inner bureaucracy, and working on a poem helps me to focus on something else, and when the poem is working, it takes me out of myself entirely. I’m the camera, not what’s being photographed. And what’s odd about that and inevitably true is that at exactly the moment I forget about myself entirely I start to feel free and happy, I start to feel like myself, my true self.

“I never completely forget myself except when I am writing,” Flannery O’Connor says, “and I am never more completely myself than when I am writing,” and this involves a tricky thing that doesn’t very often happen but sometimes does. You try to “leave the outcome out of your personal considerations,” she says. You don’t think about publication or praise. You’re just caught up.

Fourth, poetry like prayer is something you have to practice.

In poetry as in prayer you have to wait for inspiration, you can’t just produce it on demand, but at the same time you have to set up a discipline, a routine, showing up every day at the same time in the same place and just gutting it out sometimes, just living through the many moments when you’re empty and dull. I say that in poetry as in prayer I lose myself, but a lot of the time I don’t. I’m stuck in my own mind. I just sit there and feel bored or angry or depressed. I just sit there obsessed with the outcome, lusting for attention. Sometimes for long periods I even experience what the spiritual tradition calls desolation, complete emptiness and dryness.

But practice is necessary and dryness is inevitable and even desolation is a gift, is understood by the tradition as having great spiritual content, if only because it reminds us of our need for grace, reminds us that we’re not spiritual athletes. “Contradictions, humiliations, all the soul’s miseries, her burdens, her needs, everything is the direct effect of Our Father’s Love,” St Theresa of Lisieux says, because “through them she learns humility, she realizes her weakness.” I think this is why a lot of people don’t stick with writing or with prayer, because they don’t want to face this darkness, this complexity, and I don’t blame them. It’s hard as hell. But that’s the challenge. Poetry and prayer are both practices because you just have to keep working at them, day in and day out, exactly so you can keep realizing how finally nothing you do matters anyway. All you can be is available.

Finally, poetry is like prayer because it’s both completely useless and infinitely important.

I've driven two hundred miles to read poems to six people. I had several poems published in the last few months. Who has read them? I wrote a poem last week, sitting alone in my study at the edge of the woods. Who cares? But I don't ask that with bitterness but with a kind of joy, because the obscurity of the poet confers a real freedom and because lots of things we do are obscure, maybe everything. Who cares when you throw a pot or plant a flower? Who thinks about the quiet suffering or joy of any other person among all the billions alive today or who have ever lived except now and then and for a fleeting moment?

But what I believe as a Christian or am called to believe, what I struggle to believe and sometimes do, is that we are all at the same time infinitely important, that every living thing matters, even cats, even amoebas, and that though I'm no better than anyone else I'm no worse, we all have our own small part to play, and that in fact every creative act, every healthy gesture, in some mysterious way helps advance the work of creation, which is still going on and always going on. We have to approach everything we do as the Jesuit Anthony DeMello says we should approach prayer, with the idea that we do it not just for ourselves but "for all of creation, of which we are a part." Another Jesuit, Teilhard de Chardin, imagines our mental action creating a kind of energy that helps the universe evolve:

A thought, a material improvement, a harmony, a unique nuance of human love, the enchanting complexity of a smile or a glance—the spiritual success of the universe is bound up with the release of every possible energy in it. Our smallest tasks contribute infinitesimally, at least indirectly, to the building of something definitive. We serve to complete the work of creation, even by the humblest work of our hands.

This is what poetry is for me, and this is what prayer is. They are thoughts, they are harmonies, they are the humble work of our hands, day to day and year to year, and they matter, and they don't, infinitely, and in this is all our sadness and in this is all our joy.