

October 20, 2013
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Legends

Reading: “Monet Refuses the Operation” by Lisel Mueller

This reading imagines the time in Monet’s life when his eyes were becoming more and more obscured by cataracts. His doctors were alarmed and wanted to perform cataract surgery. Monet refused. Here, Lisel Mueller imagines what he might have said.

Doctor, you say that there are no haloes
around the streetlights in Paris
and what I see is an aberration
caused by old age, an affliction.
I tell you it has taken me all my life
to arrive at the vision of gas lamps as angels,
to soften and blur and finally banish
the edges you regret I don’t see,
to learn that the line I called the horizon
does not exist and sky and water,
so long apart, are the same state of being.
Fifty-four years before I could see
Rouen cathedral is built
of parallel shafts of sun,
and now you want to restore
my youthful errors: fixed
notions of top and bottom,
the illusion of three-dimensional space,
wisteria separate
from the bridge it covers.
What can I say to convince you
the Houses of Parliament dissolve

night after night to become
the fluid dream of the Thames?

I will not return to a universe
of objects that don't know each other,
as if islands were not the lost children
of one great continent. The world
is flux, and light becomes what it touches,
becomes water, lilies on water,
above and below water,
becomes lilac and mauve and yellow
and white and cerulean lamps,
small fists passing sunlight
so quickly to one another
that it would take long, streaming hair
inside my brush to catch it.
To paint the speed of light!
Our weighted shapes, these verticals,
burn to mix with air
and changes our bones, skin, clothes
to gases. Doctor,
if only you could see
how heaven pulls earth into its arms
and how infinitely the heart expands
to claim this world, blue vapor without end.

Here ends the reading.

Sermon: Eyes to See

I tell you it has taken me all my life
to arrive at the vision of gas lamps as angels,
to learn that the line I called the horizon
does not exist....

The world
is flux, and light becomes what it touches...

Monet painted what he saw. His perspective was his truth.

As I said earlier, our worship theme this month is “Perspective.” I love this theme because it is a challenge to heart of religion...and I love a challenge.

Institutional religion has, for thousands of years, been a banner-carrier for Truth with a capital T. Right and Wrong. Fixed notions of top and bottom. Absolute truth. Permanent realities.

But the world is so much more complicated than that. And it isn't that the world used to be simpler and now it is complicated. The world was always complicated, but humankind is getting more and more able to see the complications. Sometimes people think “The world used to be more innocent when I was a child.” And the response is: Well, no. *You* were more innocent when you were a child: the world was just as messy as it ever was.¹

One philosopher said: “Be careful how you interpret the world; it *is* like that.”² Our perspective is our truth, and so we are called as people of faith, to be very aware of our perspective.

Our perspective includes
all our assumptions;
our genetics;
the ways we were raised in our families of origin;
our experiences and personalities and cultures.

¹ <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/tue-january-5-2010/even-better-than-the-real-thing> and:
<http://dish.andrewsullivan.com/2013/10/30/the-past-wasnt-more-innocent-you-were/>

² Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis, Fortress 2001), 181, quoting German philosopher Erich Heller.

And, as we look at the world, sometimes we just don't know what filters we are looking through. Like Monet, our clearest vision may still only be giving us a murky and blurry view of the world. We just don't have the full picture.

It is an interesting time for religion, in the postmodern world. Where modernism preached certainty, postmodernism preaches uncertainty. Where modernism preached that the progress of humanity is "onward and upward, forever and ever,"³ postmodernism asks "What is *onward*? Is there such thing as *upward*?"

Modernism attempts to find commonality; the modern image of religion suggests that we are walking on different paths up the same mountain. Postmodernism tells us our religious beliefs may place us on entirely different mountain ranges.

The world
is flux, and light becomes what it touches...

The pitfall of a postmodern perspective is that it can be hard to make decisions, to have the faith and courage to take a stand.

I am reminded of a photo of a protest sign I saw recently. Instead of "What do we want? Change! When do we want it? Now!" The sign said:

What do we want??
Respectful Discourse!
When do we want it??

³ From a statement of faith popular in liberal religion from the 1880s through the 1920s: "The Fatherhood of God; The Brotherhood of Man; The Leadership of Jesus; Salvation by Character; The Progress of Mankind onward and upward forever."

Now would be agreeable to me, but I am interested in your opinion.

I came across a story by Jeffrey Rayport in a collection of life lessons from Harvard Business School professors and it really spoke to me how much our perspective matters, and how we can respond as people of faith.⁴ You might not think that a former B-school prof and CEO of a major consulting firm has a lesson for us on faith, but he does.

When Jeffrey Rayport was in undergrad at Harvard, he enrolled in a zoology course. He writes that he has no recollection of why he decided to take the class except he had a long-standing admiration for lemurs.

During Jeffrey's time at Harvard, exams were given in Memorial Hall. Now that space is a dining hall for freshman, but then it was a terribly imposing and uncomfortable exam space. It is a huge room with cathedral-high ceilings, an amphitheater, and feels as long and wide as a football field. "The college would pack in as many students from as many courses as possible into this vast space and administer four-hour written exams en masse." The room was unheated and it was often extra cold because the Proctor had a bit of a sadistic streak, and found it amusing to prop the doors open to the snow blow in, falling on the pages of the shivering students' blue books and making their ink run.

Into this space with many other students come the zoology students. They take up only 2 tables in the great expanse of the room. And right before the Proctor is about to announce the beginning of the exam session, the graduate assistant for their zoology class comes in. He is pushing a laboratory cart transporting what appeared to be a large stuffed bird.

⁴ *Remember Who You Are*, "The Stuffed Bird" by Jeffrey Rayport—this whole story is paraphrasing and quoting his words.

He writes, it “‘appeared’ to be a bird, because it was standing upright, was covered in a burlap bag from its head almost to the end of its feathers. The graduate student brought the cart to the end of the table and announced, ‘This is your final exam.’”

Jeffrey and the other students “cried out in perplexity and distress bordering on hysteria.” The graduate student simply “stated that in our exam we should put our semester’s knowledge to use by characterizing the specimen of the bird as expertly as we could, inferring from the evidence before us its

migratory patterns,
daily diet,
mating habits,
communications protocols,
flocking instincts,
and, if possible, its genus and species.

The exam would take the usual four hours, and [they] were allowed to examine the specimen closely, but with one important condition: [They] could not remove the burlap bag.”

“To demonstrate a semester’s worth of learning, they had nothing to go on but the paltry view of two spindly legs, a pair of claws mounted on a stand, and an inch or so of feathers hanging below the edge of the bag.

Of course, it was possible to gauge the approximate mass and shape of the bird, but this was hardly comforting, given they had to devise four hours of written commentary regarding this unidentified, and seemingly unidentifiable, creature.”

Despite their dismay, the students begin to examine the bird. But about an hour into the exam, as all the students are furiously writing...one member of the class simply erupted.

He jumped from his chair and went over to the graduate student, declaring, “This exam is outrageous! This is an insult! I am not doing this!” He yelled about the hundreds of specimens they had examined that semester, the hours spent in dusty labs, how much money this course cost his parents in tuition bills, and so forth.

The Proctor at the far end of the exam room got on his microphone to tell him to stop the disruption, but he kept on. And the graduate assistant responded to the yelling by calmly stating, “This is your final exam. Do it!”

At this point every student in the room, no matter what exam they were working on, were watching the scene. The student announced that for him, the exam was over, he was submitting nothing, and he would sue the college if he got a bad grade. He had better things to do with his time. The proctor had come over and ordered him to sit down. He refused. At this point the proctor and graduate assistant are both yelling at the student to sit down and take his exam, but he just keeps on walking.

Finally, the graduate assistant yells across the hall at the student’s back: “*Who do you think you are to pull a stunt like this?*”

In response, Jeffrey’s classmate turned on him wildly, held up one foot in the air, pulled up his trousers to just below the knee—

as if to reveal as much of himself to the graduate student as had been revealed to the students of the bird—

and yelled back, “*I don’t know! You tell me!*”

He stomped out. And the students went back to their exams. Jeffrey Rayport writes that while this story is funny, he has taken a serious message from it. He writes: “There are no certainties in life or business. There are no guarantees about outcomes.”

As we make decisions in life, “we have little information to rely on except your own prior learning, experience, and instinct. The impediments to seeing are many: chaos in the world, irrational behavior of those around you, and an environment that can be cold and unforgiving.

The key to moving forward is to...accept that available information is, and always will be, limited, and that great actions always require real, if educated, *leaps of faith*.

Creative acts in business, as in life, demand courage...and faith—
faith in your own talents,
faith in the talents of your partners,
faith in the potential for innovation,
and faith in the possibilities for the world.”

I want to add to Jeffrey’s interpretation, that sometimes, like the angry student, we may judge our circumstances to be a terrible hardship—but if we pull out the camera lens, we are actually in a place of great privilege and opportunity.

We don’t have the full picture, ever; our perspective is always just that—our perspective. And that is both a challenge and a blessing.

On the one hand, it is harder work to figure out who we are as people of faith, and what *justice* means in such a complicated world. On the other hand, if we do that hard work, our faith becomes broader and deeper, and our commitment is strengthened.

I will not return to a universe
of objects that don’t know each other...

Let’s return to Monet.

It is a rare occasion that sermon research sends me to an ophthalmology medical journal, but there is a first time for everything.

The poem imagines what Monet would have said when refusing the operation to remove his cataracts. And it is true that Monet's impressionist style matured as his vision decayed. But that isn't the whole story. Over time, the cataracts not only blurred his vision, but changed his color perception. The world became dark yellow and brown. He could barely paint at all. He was worried he would have to stop painting entirely. And so, several years after refusing the operation, he *did* have his cataracts removed.⁵

When Monet could see with new eyes, he destroyed many of the canvases he had been working on right before the operation. The few that were saved by family members are very dark, the images almost indecipherable.

After Monet adjusted to his new colorful, bright and clear world, he began painting again. His last works are some of his most beautiful: still impressionist, painterly, moody, and now: vibrant with color. He had, once again, found the horizon. It had been there, all along.

heaven pulls earth into its arms
and infinitely the heart expands
to claim this world

May we stay open to new perspectives
Even as they challenge us
And ask us to change and grow.

⁵ <http://archophth.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=418859>

*The world
is flux, and light becomes what it touches...*

And may we have courage to take the leap of faith.
Amen.