

RESPONSIVE READING 662 (STRANGE AND FOOLISH WALLS by A.

Powell Davies)

The years of all of us are short, our lives precarious.

Our days and nights go hurrying on and there is scarcely time to do the little that we might.

Yet we find time for bitterness, for petty treason and evasion.

What can we do to stretch our hearts enough to lose their littleness?

Here we are – all of us – all upon this planet, bound together in a common destiny,

Living our lives between the briefness of the daylight and the dark.

Kindred in this, each lighted by the same precarious, flickering flame of life, how does it happen that we are not kindred in all things else?

How strange and foolish are these walls of separation that divide us!

READINGS:

The Fish

I caught a tremendous fish
and held him beside the boat
half out of water, with my hook
fast in a corner of his mouth.
He didn't fight.
He hadn't fought at all.
He hung a grunting weight,
battered and venerable
and homely. Here and there
his brown skin hung in strips
like ancient wallpaper,
and its pattern of darker brown
was like wallpaper:

shapes like full-blown roses
stained and lost through age.
He was speckled and barnacles,
fine rosettes of lime,
and infested
with tiny white sea-lice,
and underneath two or three
rags of green weed hung down.
While his gills were breathing in
the terrible oxygen
--the frightening gills,
fresh and crisp with blood,
that can cut so badly--
I thought of the coarse white flesh
packed in like feathers,
the big bones and the little bones,
the dramatic reds and blacks
of his shiny entrails,
and the pink swim-bladder
like a big peony.
I looked into his eyes
which were far larger than mine
but shallower, and yellowed,
the irises backed and packed
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass.
They shifted a little, but not
to return my stare.
--It was more like the tipping
of an object toward the light.
I admired his sullen face,
the mechanism of his jaw,
and then I saw
that from his lower lip
--if you could call it a lip
grim, wet, and weaponlike,
hung five old pieces of fish-line,
or four and a wire leader
with the swivel still attached,
with all their five big hooks
grown firmly in his mouth.
A green line, frayed at the end
where he broke it, two heavier lines,
and a fine black thread
still crimped from the strain and snap

when it broke and he got away.
Like medals with their ribbons
frayed and wavering,
a five-haired beard of wisdom
trailing from his aching jaw.
I stared and stared
and victory filled up
the little rented boat,
from the pool of bilge
where oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
the sun-cracked thwarts,
the oarlocks on their strings,
the gunnels--until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.

Elizabeth Bishop

From Chapter 31 of Huckleberry Finn:

After traveling down the Mississippi with his friend – and runaway slave – Jim, Huck learns that Jim has been captured and imprisoned. Huck faces the choice of whether to write Miss Watson, Jim’s owner, that Jim is in custody – or to help Jim escape once more. According to the world in which he lives, and the Christianity of the time, Huck’s duty to Miss Watson is clear: he must turn Jim in. When Huck has written the letter, he recounts:

“I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knowed I could pray now. But I didn’t do it straight off, but laid the letter paper down and set there thinking – thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell. And went on thinking. And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me, all the time, in the day, and in the nighttime, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a floating along, talking, and singing, and laughing. But somehow I couldn’t seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. I’d see him standing my watch on top of his’n, stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I come back

out of the fog; and when I come to him again in the swamp, up there where the feud was; and such-like times; and would always call me honey, and pet me, and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling the men we had small-pox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and only one he's got now; and then I happened to look around, and see that paper.

It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:

'All right, then, I'll go to hell' – and tore it up."

SERMON: SHIFTING SANDS, SHIFTING TRUTHS

The idea for this sermon came from a story I wrote last winter, recounting an experience I had about 20 years ago. I'll get to that story soon. The story captivated me because it made me think about moments in life when my understanding of the world around me changes, sometimes radically, in an instant. Like turning a kaleidoscope and looking at the same objective reality, but seeing something completely different than I had seen an instant earlier. But after I read the story to my children, Emma and Eli, who are central characters in it, I wasn't sure whether they were comfortable with my including it in a sermon (they are!), I had to face their questions. "What are you trying to say with this story? You say at the end that this has something to do with 'growing a soul.' But what does the story have to do with growing a soul?" I was struggling with some writer's block at the time and their questions seemed as insurmountable as building-sized sand dunes. So I set out to discover – what does this kind of instantaneous shifts in understanding have to do with growing a soul?

Here is the story I started with:

It was a Friday evening, stifling. The only bright star for me that night, was that the next morning my husband and I would pile into our car and drive to Cass Lake, Minnesota, where we would board a pontoon boat for Starbuck Island in the middle of the lake. Once there, we would spend a week at Camp Unistar, a place that offers evidence to the doubting Unitarian Universalists that heaven does exist. We were all looking forward to it – my husband, Emma, who was almost 17; and Eli, a few months shy of 15.

It was traditional to bring with us a store of snacks to share with fellow campers and at around 8 evening, the night before we were to leave for Unistar, Eli and I, set out for our local grocery store, Rainbow Food to buy the week's provisions. I was fairly grumpy and, because of the heat, in an altered state. Eli, the extroverted family, was pleased to be getting out of the house and away from the tensions associated with last-minute packing and laundry.

The Rainbow chain of grocery stores in Minnesota had been purchased a year or so before, and the owners were remodeling all of the stores, including ours. Every time I had walked in over the six weeks preceding this particular night, all of the groceries were in ever-changing temporary displays. On this night the process was complete – but the store was, again, all different from anything it had been before. I had the impression that this store, in which I had been shopping for maybe 20 years, was a completely different store. I couldn't find anything.

We'd been in the store maybe ten minutes, when we happened upon the greeting card aisle. Remembering that we would be celebrating Emma's 17th birthday while away at Unistar, I suggested to Eli that we choose a set of appropriate birthday cards. Together we flipped through racks of the sort of birthday cards often sold at grocery stores – generally not the kind that I favor. I quickly began to lose hope and interest in the mission. Eli kept on to humor me with his ideas. He pulled out one of those cards sporting a picture of a movie-star-handsome-bodied stud-of-a-man with words on the front along the lines of “For your birthday, I got you a Stud” or something like that and flashed it in front of my sagging eyes. “No!” I exclaimed, probably more animated than I'd been all evening. The thing is, Emma, at the age of 17, had never displayed the slightest interest in a romantic relationship with a man. In fact, if forced to acknowledge the idea of physical love, Emma tended to express disdain if not disgust. She was not the sort who would see the humor in such a card. I said as much to Eli. “Well, at least we can buy it and give it to Kerri,” Eli responded. “No!” I couldn't believe Eli would suggest that we give such a card to our dear family friend Kerri, a completely out lesbian.

Eli and I hung there a moment, in suspended animation, gazing at one another, the card dangling from Eli's hand. Something was happening in my brain. Bolts of zig-zaggy lightening were connecting dots. Eli's jump from the thought of Emma to the mention of Kerri, Emma's steadfast refusal to seem at all interested in dating, but I couldn't stop it, the connection was made, and the spark leaped from my mouth. Like a puzzled puppy, head tilted, I imagine, I looked at Eli and spoke, involuntarily, “Is Emma a lesbian?” I asked.

Eli looked at me, uncharacteristically silent for an instant. A beat was all it took, then he re-answered. “Well, yeah!” His tone contained both astonishment (are we really having this conversation?) and condescension (of course you knew that!). I took in a deep breath, took the stud card out of his hand, hurriedly found a couple of unsatisfactory but somewhat acceptable alternative cards and threw them in the basket. Thoughts were flying through my head. What had made me ask him such a thing? If I wanted to ask Emma if she was a lesbian, I could ask her. Why ask her brother? That didn’t seem right. But how did he know? They had always been close, but would he have talked to him about such things? Could he be wrong? The grocery store was starting to dip and turn around like an amusement park ride.

We continued to shop in silence for a few minutes. We needed beans of some sort, I don’t remember. Or maybe it was paper towels. Or crackers. Whatever it was, we couldn’t find it, could we? And then, miraculously, we did. We were standing together, examining some products on the shelves and the room was shifting around me. Eli was trying to help me make a selection when, suddenly, the weather in my brain started acting up again. The floor was an undersea volcano bubbled up from inside my brain and, before I knew it, I had lost control again and the lights were out before I knew they were in, “Well, are you gay?” Eli stopped again. Completely stopped. Turned to look at me, wondering what was with me. We were in the middle of a grocery store! There were people shopping all around us. We didn’t know them, they didn’t know us. A decision. “Well, duh, Mom, in case you didn’t know it – you’re the two gayest kids on the planet!” Leaving me with the only possible response, “I guess I didn’t know it, but I wouldn’t have asked. Let’s get this brand.” And I picked up whatever it was and put it in the basket and consulted my shopping list. We continued our mapless search.

Long before I outed my children to myself at Rainbow, I was Standing on the Side of Love, as they say. It was not hard for me to accept that they are gay – not for a moment. But I was literally dizzy for about two or three weeks after that night. Because even though I was completely accepting, my children, the people in the world around me, the best, suddenly looked different than they had. A twist of the wrist, the kaleidoscope turned, and they were the same, but completely different. Now, almost five years after that evening, the image that lingers is that image of the kaleidoscope being turned, quickly, changing my understanding of everything, yet changing nothing at all. The Greeks called it anagnorisis. Aristotle spoke of this moment of recognition as an essential part of the plot of tragedy when the protagonist’s recognition of his tragic flaw leads to his downfall. The moment when Oedipus realizes he has unknowingly killed his father and married his mother. But these moments are not always tragic. In w

context they arise, they are often the moments when the window in our souls opens, providing the opportunity to need to bring about change in our lives. Sometimes small changes, sometimes giant changes.

A. Powell Davies was a Unitarian minister, for many years the minister at All Souls Church in Washington, D.C. He understood God as “what the soul ‘breathes’ as the body breathes air.” And life, Davies said, “is the chance to grow a soul.” Davies saw spiritual life as the center of religion. This notion of growing a soul cannot mean that we are born without souls – I believe it can only mean that life is the chance to nurture our souls, to bring them to maturity, and, perhaps, beyond. If we are to take advantage of this chance, it is essential to make a place for them to grow. A soul needs fertile soil. It cannot grow in an arid, sterile body. It must grow in a place where storms and quiet, dark and silent nights can pass. It must be a place that accommodate the dynamics of life and contemplate death. A soul must have windows. A soul cannot be sealed up tight. It must be open, it must breathe, it must let in the seeds that will come its way.

I believe that everyone is born with a soul that is open, welcoming and fertile. Children have souls that are touched by change and that grow with understanding. But as we experience the natural cycles of pain and sorrow in our lives, we close the windows to our souls, cutting them off from the seeds they need and from the nurture necessary to grow those seeds.

But why is it important to grow souls? A mature soul, a knowing soul, is a soul that will let itself be touched by the possibility of acting differently, of choosing differently, when it is touched with a new understanding. Huckleberry Finn hesitated because he suddenly saw Jim differently than he had before. He saw Jim’s importance in his life, the importance to Jim’s. In Unitarian Universalist terms, he saw the inherent worth and dignity of Jim, and he saw that he was connected to him. Elizabeth Bishop also saw something different as she looked at the fish she had caught. She saw “a five-haired beard of wisdom trailing from” the fish’s “aching jaw.” She stared and stared “and victory flashed over the little rented boat.” She stared and stared – and in the shifting of the moment, she let the fish go.

Sometimes, such a transformation eludes us. We experience the shift, on some level, but we do not let it in. We do not accept it. We keep the windows closed.

September 11, 2001: We all remember where we were when we heard. I had just come out of the Y. I got into the car to drive to work. I turned on the radio and the news pummeled me. I drove to work, tears streaming.

down my face, as the towers fell. I was so grateful to be working here, to be able to find sanctuary, literally, to be in the sanctuary on my arrival.

It was a perfect September morning; the sky was pure pure blue. A morning that would have made me rejoice. But suddenly, the blue brilliant sky did not warm me. The same blue sky I had loved all my life was suddenly empty. It changed in an instant. The falling of the towers, the crashing of the planes, those were the seconds that changed our way of seeing. The attack was the moment when a way of knowing the world changed, when things that seemed safe anymore. We, Americans, shared that frightening shift in understanding that morning as we realized we could be, we were, hated that much. That, with a flick of the wrist, in the blink of an eye, the unthinkable could happen.

It was a moment for peace, I thought as I sang the hymn “This Is My Song.” “This is my home, the place where my heart is; here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine; but other hearts in other lands are beating with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.” A moment, like the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, with the horror of what we humans could do to one another would make us realize that we must find peace. That we, Americans, would have to open our hearts to begin to understand why we were so hated. That others in the world would have to stand with us, to help to bridge the river of hatred and misery and anger. I thought that this moment would change everything.

But it did not change everything in the way I hoped. It led to war, not to peace. It led to more danger, more loss. I don't pretend to know whether we could possibly have refrained from military action in response to September 11. But I wonder whether, if our leaders, political and military, had stopped in that moment to see with a new understanding, if they had allowed themselves to be aware of what was driving those who were trying to destroy us, maybe they would have considered alternative, or at least parallel, approaches to the military response. Instead, our response was to lash out and to hit back. An understandable response, but not one infused with the breath of God. We lost a collective chance to grow a soul.

So – how do we open the windows to our souls, to let the air in, to let God in, to make them vibrant and fertile so they can grow? I think the windows open, if we let them, at the moments when we suddenly see the world differently than we have before. If we pay attention to those moments, if we are mindful of them, we can help our windows open, we can make room for change, we can help our souls to grow.

That moment of shifting understanding is not always large. In the past ten years, I have become a regular speed-walker or swimmer. I move, breathing and trying to let my thoughts quiet with the rhythmic movements. I am not a person who usually takes close note of the physical world around me. But I do try to notice things while I am exercising, and sometimes I find myself looking at what I have always seen, and seeing it differently. It can be a clock on the wall or a tree out the window. Or some person I have seen before on the street. Suddenly, something in me opens. The curve of a branch takes on a grace I hadn't noticed before. The elder whom I have seen countless times is fierce in his concentration on the exercise. The sky outside is bigger and brighter than I have ever been aware of. Could it be that I could actually see the Mystery in it? If I allowed myself to believe in something I've always rejected before? If I can hold myself open to these different ways of seeing, maybe I can just give my soul what it needs to grow. And if I grow my own soul, maybe I can help the world grow a little better, too. Well.

Benediction

What can we do to stretch our hearts, and souls, enough to lose their littleness? We can stop when everything changes, see the world anew, and help our souls to grow. May today be a day full of chances to grow your soul.