

Thank You, Summer Days (36x30)
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Reading 1-Georgia O'Keefe

It was in the fall of 1915 that I first had the idea that what I had been taught was of little value to me except for the use of my materials as a language-charcoal, pencil, pen and ink, watercolor, pastel, and oil. I had become fluent with them when I was so young that they were simply another language that I handled easily. But what to say with them? I had been taught to work like others and after carefully thinking I decided that I wasn't going to spend my life doing what had already been done.

I hung on the wall the work I had been doing for several months. Then I sat down and looked at it. I could see how each painting or drawing had been done according to one teacher or another, and I said to myself, "I have things in my head that are not like what anyone has taught me-- shapes and ideas so near to me---so natural to my way of being and thinking that it hasn't occurred to me to put them down." I decided to start anew--to strip away what I had been taught--to accept as true my own thinking. This was one of the best times in my life. There was no one around to look at what I was doing--no one interested--no one to say anything about it one way or another. I was alone and singularly free, working into my own unknown--no one to satisfy but myself. I began with charcoal and paper and decided not to use any color until it was impossible to do what I wanted to do in black and white. I believe it was June before I needed the color blue.

Reading 2-Grover from Sesame Street

Now, I am near
Now, I am far
Near
Far

Reading 3-Alan Watts

Reading 2-Alan Watts

The main function of a university is-as any sensible person would imagine-to teach students and to do research. So, the faculty should be the most important thing in the university. On the contrary. The administration is the most important thing. The people who keep the records?who make the game rules up. And so, the faculty are always being obstructed by the administration and being forced to attend irrelevant meetings...to do everything but scholarship.

Do you know what scholarship means? What school means? The original meaning of a *schola*? Leisure. We talked of "a scholar and a gentleman" because a gentleman was a person who had a private income and he could afford to be a scholar. He didn't have to earn a living. Therefore, he could study the classics and poetry and things like that.

Today, nothing is more busy than a school. They make you work, work, work, work, work because you've got to get through on schedule. They have expedited courses and you go to school so as to get a union card or a Ph.D. or something so that you can earn a living. It is a whole contradiction of scholarship. Scholarship is to study everything that is unimportant, not necessary for survival, all the charming irrelevancies of life. But the thing is this. If you don't have

room in your life for the playful, life is not worth living. All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. But if the only reason for which Jack plays is that he can work better afterwards, he's not really playing. He's playing because it's good for him. He's not playing at all!

To be a true scholar, you have to cultivate an attitude to life where you are not trying to get anything out of it. You pick up a pebble on the beach and look at it. Beautiful. Don't try to get a sermon out of it. Sermons and stones and God and everything? [Pfff? a dismissive gesture] Just enjoy it. Don't feel that you've got to salve your conscience by saying this is for the advancement of your aesthetic understanding. Enjoy the pebble. If you do that, you will become healthy.

Sermon

I am thankful for a painting but I'm not going to talk about it yet. I need to work through an idea. I have a thought that I just can't seem to shake.

If Georgia O'Keefe were alive today, I think that she would be a musician. I think that she would be a rock star, actually. In fact, if she were alive today, I think she'd be Alanis Morissette. I'm pretty sure. I know what you're thinking. You think it's strange, but it's true. If you really listen to Alanis Morissette, you might figure out exactly what I mean. Then again, you might not. It is fair to say that the likeness is not immediately apparent. On the surface, Georgia and Alanis have little in common.

This may seem like a strange way to begin a worship service on gratitude. In fact, it may be a strange way to begin but I'm gonna do it anyway. I'd like to start by cataloging some of the obvious differences. If we could get the superficial stuff out of the way, we could move on to the part that matters. One woman was born in 1887—that would be Georgia—and the other woman was born in 1974. That's different. So, they are not peers or contemporaries, really. One woman *paints* with sound and time—that would be Alanis—and the other woman paints with color and shape. That's different too. So, they did not collaborate on much of anything, it's safe to say. Let's explore these.

One woman is near to us. She paints with sound and time...that would be Alanis Morissette. Here's the scene.

A young woman clears away the too-much mascara from her face. It had seemed like an improvement when she put it on the night before. The party she was going to almost required it. She wiped it off as soon as she got home. That made her look like she'd been crying but she had not been. She had been thinking. She had become too bored and too angry to cry any more than she had. She was too shattered from herself to cry...and too ungrounded. She was looking for an anchor in her life. And she found music and then she fell like Icarus through the sky. She sang,

Thank you India
Thank you terror
Thank you disillusionment

And she meant it. She sang these words in 1995. She had known nothing about the meaning of 'terror' in a post-9/11 world. She had known nothing about the recent tragedy in Mumbai. She had known about disillusionment and she was thankful for what

she knew. It better explained the things that she had been feeling. She didn't know so much about the violence in the outside world. The violence that she knew best took place *within* her fragile body. So, she was doing her best to spend as much time away from it as she possibly could. That's what the partying had been about. It was a chance to get away, if only from herself.

Outwardly, she was trying to hold everything together but inwardly, she was unraveling and falling apart. She was unraveling and also slowly breaking free, free of the illusions that had imprisoned her. No one wants to take that journey. It looks like such a leap...and it is a leap. Abraham didn't want to go but,

Men go out from the places where they dwelled

They know not why or whither...

Called and compelled, something draws us on, through great obstacles.

As Abraham saw dawn remote and chill,

Etching old Ur along the lonely north

And bowed himself to his loved earth,

And rent his garments, cried he could not go...and went.

Something, something unnamable draws us on.

Something drew Alanis on. Something called her and she followed. She had only to find strength enough to let it happen and she did. She found strength in unlikely places. She sang,

Thank you frailty

Thank you consequence

Thank you thank you silence

And she meant it. For a long time, she had been inwardly collapsing, but no more.

"Today is a new day," she said to the mirror and to herself...and, perhaps, to us. This time, she was finally listening...newly faithful, having discovered beauty beneath the make-up.

A young woman clears away the too-much mascara and saw herself anew. She stared at the mirror for long minutes until she finally saw herself. Then, she spent more time learning how to speak. When she did, her voice was different than it had ever been before. It was grounded and reassuring and newly believable. Washed clean like the first good snow in winter. No longer was she acceptably polite. She was arriving. She was returning to herself. She was coming home...coming home by leaving, ironically. She sang,

The moment I let go of it

Was the moment I got more than I could handle

The moment I jumped off of it

Was the moment I touched down

Everything was both in place and out of synch, familiar and entirely unknown.

Everything seemed to make good sense and, at the same time, was utterly confusing.

Somehow, the contradictions calmed her soul.

Alanis Morissette released an album called *Jagged Little Pill* in 1995. She was 21. It had not been an easy experience for her. Robbed at gunpoint in LA months before the recording session, Alanis became filled with fear and anxiety. She became serially ill and

developed a chronic eating disorder. She fell into a depression and had to be hospitalized. Standard medicines and psychotherapy sessions failed her but music did not. She sang the ghosts out of her ailing body. She sang her spiritual self into physical well-being. She was healthy. The road was long but one day, there she was—clearing away the too-much mascara and discovering the beauty of her own face, a beauty that she had not seen in years.

She didn't know how to tell this story of self-discovery but she tried. She tried but the story was always a bit too thin. People laughed at the wrong parts. It was awkward. The words made the story seem like a wish-list of possibilities...

How about me not blaming you for everything
How about me enjoying the moment for once
How about how good it feels to finally forgive you
How about grieving it all one at a time
Thank you...

How about no longer being masochistic
How about remembering your divinity
How about unabashedly bawling your eyes out
How about not equating death with stopping
Thank you India

What a journey. I wonder if she could have gone to her church with her deepest fears and anxieties. I wonder what it means that our twenty and thirty somethings so often leave the church during those years. I wonder how we would grow by standing with her on the journey. Maybe one day, she would sing to us.

Thank you India
Thank you providence
Thank you disillusionment
Thank you nothingness
Thank you clarity
Thank you thank you silence

Providence replaces terror. Nothingness replaces frailty. Clarity replaces consequence. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

One woman is near to us. She paints with sound and time...that's Alanis
The other woman far away. She paints with color and shape... Here's the scene. It begins with a quotation from Georgia O'Keefe...

The meaning of a word—to me—is not as exact as the meaning of a color. Colors and shapes make a more definite statement than words. I write this because such odd things have been done about me with words. I have often been told what to paint. I am often amazed at the spoken and written word telling me what I have

painted. I make this effort because no one else can know how my paintings happen.

Where I was born and where and how I have lived is unimportant. It is what I have done with where I have been that should be of interest.

One has to really listen to the paintings of Georgia O'Keefe just as one has to really listen to music. One has to listen closely...to the skull and antlers; to the bones, bone-dry from wind and weather; bones bleached white as a gravestone, come as monuments to themselves; bones burned white by the sun, that scorchingly distant summer dove, that unrelenting and vengeful desiccant on which all life only half depends. The rest is rain. With these, the flowers know to grow. One has to listen closely to the balance near at hand. One must also listen from far away...to distant hills worn smooth by wind, by rain and by time in gentlest collision—time, measured both in seconds and in bundles of fifty thousand years; to the trees—gnarled and dotting the landscape—surviving admirably and as difficult as grandmothers...tenacious, steadfast and resolved to stand their ground despite conditions.

One has to listen closely to that which is so near to us, so near that we cannot image speaking about it—like the laughter of lovers in next rooms, like an unexpected and friendly hello, like satisfying sneezes and apple orchards and good donuts and average coffee... One has to listen from a distance to that which is a bit farther away, so far that we can only hear it in our hearts. Near and far, a strange coincidence of opposites. One has to listen also to the flowers that bloom before us and in mid-air—fire-red and day-spring yellow or light purple, against the odds—and the flower within us that is impossibly beautiful. One has to listen...to the wisp of clouds into which a bold-blue sky enfolds itself. One has to listen to the paintings of Georgia O'Keefe. They are like music. In fact, they *are* music. You can even dance to them. In fact, I highly recommend it. They will stare at us but they will not throw us out of the museum. I guarantee.

Isn't that a healthier image? I mean, the headphones and the informational recordings are great and everything. You can learn a lot from them. But wouldn't dancing in the museum be so nice? *A pas de deux* between the viewer and the painting itself. Just imagine... They leap from the walls and whisk us off our feet into thin air. Or else they pound their feet like wildest buffalo enough to shake the mantle of this gentle earth. Or else, they rampage and rock our old pretenses to their utter foundations—naked and shining, breathless and thrilled—we are released and we live again. For that, they will throw us out of the museum...but after they do they will lock the doors and—mark my words—they will try it out themselves. How could they not? How else can you learn to find the downbeat? You got to dance. One must listen to the paintings of Georgia O'Keefe.

I wanted to know her. She seemed to know me. She told me so herself. Not through her words exactly, although I find them helpful. She told me that she knew me through shape and color. I wished that I could, somehow, return the affection. But I cannot. She is gone from us, like a cherished elder. The *New York Times* described her as “the woman who did not think that she would ever die and almost didn't.” And they were almost right. I admire that about her. Thankful for it. That little rule-breaker. She

passed away in 1986. She was ninety-nine years young at heart when she went. I am grateful for her presence in my life. Thank you, Georgia. Thank you, dear O'Keefe for *Summer Days*. You are my favorite dancing partner. Our favorite song is *Summer Days*. You painted that song in 1936.

Summer Days is impressively large in its dimensions—36 x 30. Not as large as some of her others, to be sure, but still impressive. Its weight is balanced between a wash of heavy color at the bottom of the canvass and the powerful image of a skull and antlers that seem to grab the dream of an American imagination. Accenting, there are several flowers that are disproportionately large beneath its gaze. The antlers almost reach out from the painting and the distant hills almost seem to recede. *Summer Days* is at once too close and impossibly far away...just like Georgia and Alanis Morissette, just like the precious, fragile and mundane miracle of life. Georgia O'Keefe created her own language. She said,

I have things in my head that are not like what anyone has taught me—shapes and ideas so near to me—so natural to my way of being and thinking that it hasn't occurred to me to put them down.

Georgia's language was not a language of words and stories. It was a language of colors, shapes and abstract ideas. She couldn't talk about it—or chose not to. The painting was enough. It simply was what it was. Through beauty, the brief and momentary capture of grace, it seems that we understand her perfectly. We may or may not like her painting, but that's not the point. The point is that the miracle is possible. The point is that we can speak from our deepest soul to one another in a way that makes some sense. It is enough to be grateful for possibility. Miracles are made of only this.

The near and the far together are possible. We are strong enough now to manage the tension. We have not always been. Then we had to be thankful for very small things—average coffee, to be sure; and a good donut; a satisfying sneeze...or its absence... The closing story comes from Martin Luther King. I will quote his words at some length, his words of gratitude.

Let us stand with a greater determination. And let us move on in these powerful days, these days of challenge to make America what it ought to be. We have an opportunity to make America a better nation. And I want to thank God, once more, for allowing me to be here with you.

You know, several years ago, I was in New York City autographing the first book that I had written. And while sitting there autographing books, a demented black woman came up. The only question I heard from her was, "Are you Martin Luther King?" And I was looking down writing, and I said, "Yes." And the next minute I felt something beating on my chest. Before I knew it I had been stabbed by this demented woman. I was rushed to Harlem Hospital. It was a dark Saturday afternoon. And that blade had gone through, and the X-rays revealed that the tip of the blade was on the edge of my aorta, the main artery. And once that's punctured, your drowned in your own blood -- that's the end of you.

It came out in the New York Times the next morning, that if I had merely sneezed, I would have died. Well, about four days later, they allowed me...to read some of the mail

that came in, and from all over the states and the world... I read a few, but one of them I will never forget. [It] came from a little girl, a young girl who was a student at the White Plains High School. And I looked at that letter, and I'll never forget it. It said simply,

Dear Dr. King,
I am a ninth-grade student at the White Plains High School."

And she said,

While it should not matter, I would like to mention that I'm a white girl. I read in the paper of your misfortune, and of your suffering. And I read that if you had sneezed, you would have died. And I'm simply writing you to say that I'm so happy that you didn't sneeze.

The little things and the big things are one in the same. The near is tied to far. Alanis Morissette to Georgia O'Keefe. Young to old and old to new. You to me and I to you. This a prayer and boundless miracle. May it be so. Blessed be and amen.