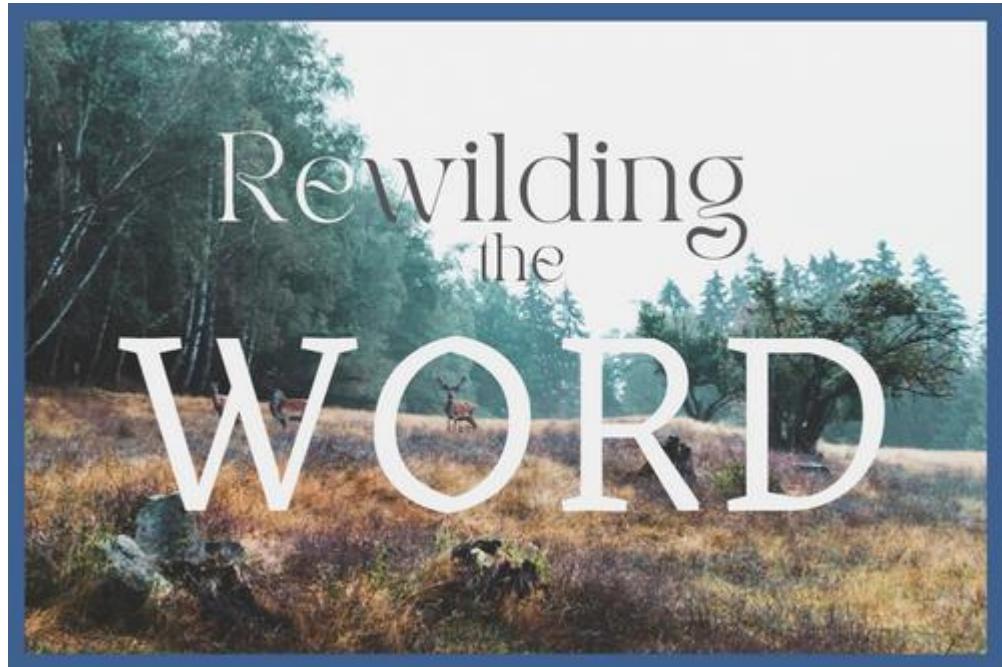

GANZ - #13 - REWILDLING THE WORD (JANUARY 2025)



A Story

Last weekend, I was engaged with a men's Retreat – 112 of us from Vancouver-Portland and environs¹.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “to retreat” – **2.a. - a1460** – *transitive*. To cause to move back or withdraw; to pull back; *esp.* to pull back (an army, troops, etc.), *esp.* when confronted by a superior force; to lead back; to order to retreat.

The noun “retreat” is a word the Christian religious tradition stole from the world of military conflict. (The Society of Jesus – the Jesuits – is a distinguished tradition of thievery in this regard, because the Jesuit Order is particularly famous for Retreat-

¹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “environs” – **2.a. - c1660** – *In plural*. The areas surrounding a place (frequently an urban area); one's surroundings.

giving.) How could a noun so filled with suggestions of conflict and blood and death ever have come to mean a wise spiritual practice?

I described a Retreat in this way to someone asking me about it before he signed up for the Retreat:

A *retreat* [those experiencing it are called *retreatants*] is about what God wishes to do in your life when you surrender, in this case, a weekend to Him. You give God your full attention, letting God find and bless you as He wishes. You may come to this retreat expecting, for example, to grow in your understanding and practice of discernment only to discover that what God chose instead was to utterly change your life in some way that you did not expect. The essence of a retreat, then, is a combination of your willingness to let God have you for a weekend, to have unrestricted access to you, and counting on God's enormous capacity to work in you for your good and beyond your expectations or asking.

In its military context, a “retreat” is decided by a general officer in the “fog” of battle, when he or she observes, from his or her location - enough removed from the actual battle - that his or her troops are in difficulty. He or she must decide whether the troops, and the battle plan given them by the general staff, is achieving significant progress. If things are not looking good for his or her troops, and *if the general officer loves his or her troops* (and that is of very great importance) then he or she will *call a retreat*. And woe betide² the general officer who cares not, letting his or her troops get slaughtered, and then blaming them.

But remember that a retreat is not a surrender. A retreat is for the sake of returning to battle and winning, having rested and with a better battle plan. Jesus reminded us, and the Saints have most vividly demonstrated, the fact that in this world we are not dealing with *merely* worldly powers – “esp. when confronted by a superior force” as the definition of “retreat” noted.

Ephesians 6 (NJB): ¹⁰Finally, grow strong in the Lord, with the strength of his power. ¹¹Put on the full armour of God so as to be able to resist the devil’s tactics. ¹²For it is not against human enemies that we have to struggle, but against the principalities and the ruling forces who are masters of the darkness in this world, the spirits of evil in the heavens. ¹³That is why you must take up all

² The *Oxford English Dictionary* – P.3. - c1390 – **woe betide you** (also **him, her, etc.**): (originally) may evil or misfortune happen to you (him, etc.); (in later use *colloquial* with weakened sense) you (he, etc.) will get into trouble (if...). Also, without object (now *archaic* and *rare*).

God's armour, or you will not be able to put up any resistance on the evil day or stand your ground even though you exert yourselves to the full.³

This world takes its toll on all of us. And our dear Lord knows that our battle for what is genuine, what is real, for what matters, can wear us out, especially when previously formidable Institutions of wisdom have forgotten what they mean and are for, and too often have proven that they are incapable of meeting the moment.

"The world is too much with us; late and soon, / Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers; ... / We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!"⁴

In such times, we may hear, if we listen, a battle horn sounding, calling us to retreat – even a Retreat at Cannon Beach - and to regroup at the tent of our Lord, whom we describe in this way:

Isaiah 9 (NJB):

⁵⁽⁶⁾ For a son has been born for us,
a son has been given to us,
and dominion has been laid on his shoulders;
and this is the name he has been given,
'Wonder-Counsellor, Mighty-God,
Eternal-Father, Prince-of-Peace',
⁶⁽⁷⁾ to extend his dominion in boundless peace,
over the throne of David and over his kingdom
to make it secure and sustain it
in fair judgement and integrity.
From this time onwards and forever,
the jealous love of Yahweh Sabaoth will do this.⁵

Our Lord's decision to call us to retreat comes from His "fair judgment and integrity" and from His "jealous love" for us who long for the coming of His kingdom – "my kingdom is not of this world", Jesus said to Pilate - (but His jealous love also for us who ignore Him).

³ [The New Jerusalem Bible](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Eph 6:10-13.

⁴ The opening lines of the poem by William Wordsworth:
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45564/the-world-is-too-much-with-us>.

⁵ [The New Jerusalem Bible](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Is 9:5-6.

We need such retreats; God knows that we do. The long Tradition, and in all the great Religions, know that we must establish this habit.⁶ And I again witnessed why this is so, when watching those men last weekend become so available to God and to each other. As I was working this last weekend among these good men, I recalled these consoling lines:

Hebrews 12 (NJB):

¹ With so many witnesses in a great cloud all around us, we too, then, should throw off everything that weighs us down and the sin that clings so closely, and with perseverance keep running in the race which lies ahead of us. ² Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection: for the sake of the joy which lay ahead of him, he endured the cross, disregarding the shame of it, and *has taken his seat at the right of God's throne*. ³ Think of the way he persevered against such opposition from sinners and then you will not lose heart and come to grief. ⁴ In the fight against sin, you have not yet had to keep fighting to the point of bloodshed. ⁷

A Text – “Hope is a Thing with Feathers” (314)⁸ by Emily Dickinson⁹

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -

⁶ At the Faber Institute, we have as one of our central habits the giving of Retreats in the fashion of the Jesuit Order and its implementation of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius.

⁷ [The New Jerusalem Bible](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Heb 12:1-4.

⁸ Copyright Credit: Emily Dickinson, "Hope' is the Thing with Feathers" from *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson, ed., Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University press, Copyright © 1951, 1955, 1979, 1983 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Reprinted by permissions of the publishers and Trustees of Amherst College.

⁹ **Dickinson, Emily, 1830-86, American poet, b. Amherst, Mass.** She is widely considered one of the greatest poets in American literature. Her unique, gemlike lyrics are distillations of profound feeling and original intellect that stand outside the mainstream of 19th-century American literature. [Paul Lagassé, Columbia University, in *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, 6th edition (New York; Detroit: Columbia University Press; Sold and distributed by Gale Group, 2000).]

And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -
And sore must be the storm -
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm -

I've heard it in the chillest land -
And on the strangest Sea -
Yet - never - in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of me.

A Close Reading

“Hope” is the thing with feathers – that perches in the soul – The poet seems intent on analyzing “hope” (notice the quotation marks around that noun), calling it a “thing” ... rather than using a metaphor, “Hope is a bird” or a simile, “like” a bird. If she had done this, then we might have spent our time wondering about what kind of bird. Let us explore what she might have meant.



Baptism of the Christ (1470-1475) by Leonardo da Vinci (apprentice) and Andrea del Verrocchio (master), Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy

(1) The Holy Spirit, in both biblical imagery and in the artistic tradition, is regularly symbolized by a “dove” that descends – something “perches”¹⁰ if it first descends. And when we (perhaps the poet) is thinking of one particular “dove” (as in the painting above), the one that descended on Jesus at His baptism (Mark 1:9-11), then suddenly we understand that the “hope” the poet means is something about the inner reality of God Himself, powerful enough to “tear open the heavens” (Mark 1:10) and so forceful in purpose that it “drives” Jesus into the desert, as the text says: “And at once the Spirit drove him into the desert and he remained there for forty days and was put to the test by Satan.” (Mark 1:12)

This “thing with feathers” - the fierceness of God. *Hope*.

¹⁰ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**to perch**” – II.3. - ?a1425 – *intransitive*. Of a bird: to alight or settle on a perch; to roost. Hence of a person or animal: to sit, stand, or rest, esp. in an elevated or somewhat precarious position. Also, in extended use.

(2) This image of the “thing with feathers” is the poet’s way of expressing the opposite of *what it feels like* to be in despair,¹¹ or close to it. A person feels *weighed down*, compelled to carry a burden too great. But when hope returns, he or she feels lighter, as if by contrast he or she could fly. Recall the fabulous transformation of Scrooge on Christmas morning:

His hands were busy with his garments all this time: turning them inside out, putting them on upside down, tearing them, mislaying them, making them parties to every kind of extravagance. “I don’t know what to do!” cried Scrooge, laughing and crying in the same breath; and making a perfect Laocoön of himself with his stockings. “I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel, I am as merry as a school-boy. I am as giddy as a drunken man. A merry Christmas to everybody! A happy New Year to all the world! Hallo here! Whoop! Hallo!”¹²

And finally, (3) one of the sufferings of a despairing person is that his or her *horizon*¹³ – what a person can see from where he or she is standing – dramatically shrinks. *Despair is a disease of magnification*, whereby a person sees less and less, only a curated selection of hurtful or violent or disappointing or evil images or thoughts, which become magnified, distorted, and even scary in his or her sickened consciousness. (Think of the overly large, and impossibly sharp and too many teeth in the mouth of a monster.) Now consider the poet’s “thing with feathers” – “the little Bird” (a few lines down). The one thing that a bird can do is to fly, being “light as a feather” we say. And when it does, it is able to see far more of the whole pattern than we human beings can see who by nature can only walk or climb. A *bird has an expansive perspective*, seeing into a more distant horizon.

¹¹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “despair” – 1.a. - c1325 – The action or condition of despairing or losing hope; a state of mind in which there is entire want of hope; hopelessness.

¹² Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, Stave 5, p. 166 in the Penguin edition.

¹³ Bernard Lonergan, SJ on “horizon” in *Method in Theology*, p. 236: “What lies beyond one’s horizon is simply outside the range of one’s knowledge and interests: one neither knows nor cares. But what lies within one’s horizon is in some measure, great or small, an object of interest and of knowledge.” And John Dadosky in *The Wisdom of Order: An Exploration of Lonergan’s Method in Theology* (2024): “Another term for the abiding feelings of love and mystery that Lonergan suggests but does not develop is *transcendental feelings*. Those feelings not only move us towards transcendence but propel us into a new horizon of knowing and choosing: “in full consciousness feelings so deep and strong … they channel attention, shape one’s horizon, direct one’s life”. The notion of transcendental feelings, especially with respect to falling in love, with a human being or with God, is especially helpful because (1) it describes how such feelings orient us towards another, and (2) in both cases, love for another and love for God, the feelings reorient our horizons vertically into a new expansive horizon.”

And sings the tune without the words – This line is so like Dickinson: the reader has no idea what she means, but he or she somehow catches on. What I think of here is that famous moment on a mountainside, when Elijah waited on God (1 Kings 19:1-21). He had been commanded by God to walk to Horeb, walking away from his life which suddenly, and because of Elijah's own murderous indiscretions, was in mortal danger because of an angry Queen – “then he [Elijah] was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life.” (Best not to mess with Jezebel.¹⁴) On that mountain, Elijah was taught how to distinguish the true voice of God from what he had thought were the true voices: not that … nor that … not that either. Instead, 1 Kings 19: ¹² And after the earthquake, fire. But Yahweh was not in the fire. And after the fire, *a light murmuring sound.* ¹⁵ In other words, “a tune without the words.”

An Action

If you choose not to memorize this, one of Emily Dickinson's most famous poems, then I suggest a long, slow look at Psalm 22. We guess that it might have been a Psalm of particular importance in Jesus' own spirituality. Why? Because in His terrible suffering (“terrible” seems too weak a word), and when all else had been violently torn from Him, Jesus, at the moment before His death, remembered this Psalm and began to quote it. Feel the significance of what is being expressed in the interplay between despair and hope.

¹⁴ **Jezebel** - The biblical texts present a thoroughly negative picture of this undoubtedly powerful woman. Jezebel became the influential queen of the northern kingdom as the foreign wife of Ahab. She fostered the worship of Canaanite fertility deities, supporting 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of the goddess Asherah at her royal table (1 Kgs 18:19). In the meantime, she ruthlessly persecuted the rival prophets of Yahweh, causing them to go into hiding (1 Kgs 18:4). The great Elijah himself did not underestimate her death threats (19:1-3). [Gale A. Yee, “Jezebel (Person),” in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 848.]

¹⁵ [The New Jerusalem Bible](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), 1 Ki 19:12.