

GANZ – REWILDING THE WORD #5



A Story

Even as a little boy I noticed the music of a person's voice working in his or her language.

I was captivated by the different ways that, especially adults, *sounded* English. (It never occurred to me that there were other languages.)¹ Notice that I did not say the way an

¹ UNESCO notes: "According to the *World Atlas of Languages*' methodology, there are 8,324 languages, spoken or signed, documented by the governments, public institutions, and academic communities; out of 8,324, around 7000 languages are still in use. On the *World Atlas of Languages*, every

adult *pronounced* his or her words. Pronunciation has to do with *the correct way* of forming in one's mouth the vowels and consonants in a word. No, it was the music that I noticed, the music those adults produced when pronouncing words.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**music**” – **I.1.a. - a1325** – The art or science of combining vocal or instrumental sounds to produce beauty of form, harmony, melody, rhythm, expressive content, etc.

Thus, a person may mispronounce a word and be corrected. But there is no correct way of expressing oneself musically in the words that one pronounces. Pronunciation is “owned” by the scholarly academy, who produce the dictionaries of English and describe the symbols that indicate the correct pronunciation of every word in the language. But the sounding of words from a particular mouth and resonant skull is owned only by him or her who vocalizes them – the distinctive musicality of the voice of each person.

The musicality of a particular person working in words can teach me more about the speaker - what I really want to know about him or her - than the words that he or she chooses (diction), pronounces, and arranges (composition), communicating what he or she means.

Even as a little boy I disliked adults the music of whose words was ugly, feeling my guard go up the moment that I heard them speak. And the adults who had no music – the monotonous voice of “gray” people – were people who I assumed were hiding themselves (why?). In the former case, the person exposed too much of his or her inner disorder, meanness, stinginess, or arrogance. In the latter case, the person exposed too little of himself or herself, keeping out of view.²

Many decades later, I found in myself a desire to hear the voice of Jesus as He spoke in the Gospels, the music of the God-Man working in human words. How could I possibly learn to hear His voice, I wondered? Yet I knew that how Jesus *sounded* when He said what He said was at least as important as the words he used.

language is marked distinctly according to its type, structure and affiliation, its situation, state, and status and, finally, their functions, users, and usage.”

² As a boy, I was still far too young into life to understand the toll that life takes on people, the damage that they sustain at the hands of others. Later in my life I understood how many of us never learn the wisdom to forgive – not to suppress from consciousness – those who deliberately hurt us. And when that happens, we become in the world the *wounded wondlers*. Henri Nouwen, in one of his most famous books, describes Jesus as the *wounded healer* – He who forgave us *all*.

I worked at it for years, finding analogies to what Jesus must have sounded like when listening to good, even holy, people whom I knew. "I think that Jesus would have sounded like that."

Often while listening to someone reading or quoting Jesus' words from a Gospel passage – for example, at church, or in a classroom, or on TV – I was certain that he or she had it wrong, had missed the music in Jesus' voice. "They don't know Him," I said to myself, or "No, Jesus did not sound like that. You have the right words; you don't have the Person." I did not yet know what Jesus' voice sounded like, but I was confident about what Jesus did *not* sound like. How could I know that? But I did ... and do.

It happened sometime during my late 50s that I was given to hear Jesus' voice, and it sounded from such an unexpected place.

A Text - "Sympathy" by Paul Laurence Dunbar³

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!
When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;
When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,
And the river flows like a stream of glass;
When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,⁴
And the faint perfume from its chalice steals -
I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats his wing
Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
For he must fly back to his perch and cling
When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;
And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars

³ Paul Laurence Dunbar, "Sympathy," from *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company). *The Poetry Foundation* at "Paul Laurence Dunbar" – Paul Laurence Dunbar was born on June 27, 1872, to two formerly enslaved people from Kentucky. He became one of the first influential Black poets in American literature and was internationally acclaimed for his dialect verse in collections such as *Majors and Minors* (Hadley & Hadley, 1895) and *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1896). The dialect poems constitute only a small portion of Dunbar's canon, which is replete with novels, short stories, essays, and many poems. In its entirety, Dunbar's literary body is regarded as an impressive representation of Black life in the turn-of-the-century United States.

⁴ "opes" - This is not a misspelling but an editing by Dunbar of "opens" for the sake of having a monosyllable ... which then can rhyme with "slopes" at the end of the second line of the stanza.

And they pulse again with a keener sting -
I know why he beats his wing!

I know why the caged bird sings,⁵ ah me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore, -
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings -
I know why the caged bird sings!

A Reading

“Sympathy” - To have sympathy – literally, “to suffer *with*” someone – means that a person is sensitive enough to the other that he or she recognizes that the other is suffering. He or she *stands alongside* or *with* the other. It is a kind of solace to be “seen” by a sympathetic person.

But Dunbar’s relation to the “caged bird” of this poem is not merely *sympathetic*. And here I am inviting us to make a distinction. We use (incorrectly) “sympathy” and “empathy” as synonyms.

Dunbar, in fact, has *empathy* for that bird, for its plight, which is something far greater than mere sympathy. The greatness of his poem lies in how it is that he “knows why” the caged bird feels, beats, and sings.

Empathy, a power that only *discrete charity*⁶ grants to a person, is a going-out of oneself *into* the experience of the other as other. Typically (always?) this means that he or she

⁵ This line became the title of the 1969 memoir by Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Wikipedia notes: “Maya Angelou born Marguerite Annie Johnson; April 4, 1928 – May 28, 2014) was an American memoirist, poet, and civil rights activist. She published seven autobiographies, three books of essays, several books of poetry, and is credited with a list of plays, movies, and television shows spanning over 50 years. She received dozens of awards and more than 50 honorary degrees. Angelou’s series of seven autobiographies focus on her childhood and early adult experiences. The first, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), tells of her life up to the age of 17 and brought her international recognition and acclaim.”

⁶ “**discrete charity**” – This is a favorite expression of St. Ignatius of Loyola. By “charity” he means the kind of love a person may exercise when participating in God’s own way of loving a person – “and the greatest of these is love”. By “discrete” he means *a discerning love*; that is, a love that is skillful, knowing how not to force itself on another, knowing a way to love a person so that he or she can *receive* that love in a transforming way. And, above all, “discrete charity” is the absolute opposite of *meddling* in

has shared a similar experience in his or her own life. Only love gives us this power to enter the inner experience of the other without intruding or meddling or trying to fix him or her. It is what Atticus, her father, meant when teaching Scout in chapter 3, page 26, of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960)

“Atticus stood up and walked to the end of the porch. When he completed his examination of the wisteria vine, he strolled back to me.

“First of all,” he said, “if you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you’ll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view –”

“Sir?”

“ – until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”

Empathy is what Jesus meant by “indwelling” – “as I am in the Father and the Father is in me.” Only (divine) love, given us by the Holy Spirit, gives a person the ability to be emptied enough of self, getting oneself out of the way, if you will. Empathy lets a person understand the other *from the inside*. St. Paul famously wrote of the empathy of Jesus – ⁷ But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are. ⁷ And I have liked to articulate the meaning of the theological virtues – “faith, hope, and love / and the greatest of these is love” – as the three Gifts that God gives us, by which we are able, in some degree, to experience what the Trinity is like on the inside. They bring us to the inside of their relationships with each other.

“I know why” – Notice how the stanzas are structured. The phrase “I know why” appears in the opening line of the stanza and is then repeated in the closing line. The effect is that it frames the stanza, holding it inside a pattern that repeats, just as the bars of a cage are a pattern that repeats. And inside of this frame the poet develops richly what he knows of the inner life of the caged bird – what it *feels*, why it *beats* its wings and to what effect, and why it *sings*. But don’t miss how it is only when the poet repeats the first line in the last line of each stanza that something is added. Notice the *exclamation point*. Is it clear to you why Dunbar put it there?

“feels ... beats its wing ... sings” – In the first stanza, Dunbar works to make us *feel* what a bird that is *not* caged feels, a bird that has lived free under an open sky, able to fly at will on the fragrant air singing, as the first bird sang in Paradise. “I know what the

the life of another person: “I know what you need, and I’m here to give it to you.” God save us from condescending, unskillful, self-interested “love”!

⁷ [The New Jerusalem Bible](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Php 2:7.

caged bird feels." In the second stanza, Dunbar makes us understand why, then, the caged bird battles to break free of that cage, beating its wings against the bars "Till its blood is red on the cruel bars". "I *know* why the caged bird beats its wing." In the final stanza, Dunbar startles us, revealing in the caged bird a nobility and inner strength that we did not expect could be there – "I know why the caged bird *sings*." Given the tragedy of that bird stolen from the sky and forced to live so cruelly imprisoned – from the unbounded sky into the tiny circuit of a cage – it would have made more sense to us if the line read, "I know why the caged bird *rages*." But no, *the bird sings!* That remarkable bird does not allow anyone, or any circumstance however dire, to keep it from sharing the gift that it has.

A song cannot be silenced by the bars of a cage ... unless the one caged by circumstances that he or she cannot alter decides to give up his or her song, to become and to remain silent.

I recall some lines from one of the most famous sonnets of Gerard Manley Hopkins (who also wrote a poem called "The Caged Skylark"), which, I think, corresponds to Dunbar's insight about why a bird caged, or a human being caged by prejudice, *must* sing – "But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core."

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves – goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came*.

An Action

We all now enter the Advent season – this coming Sunday – during which we prepare ourselves to contemplate the *empathic* (not merely sympathetic) nature of God. The divine Trinity not only made room for humanity within their mutual relationship, but one of their number, the second Person, emptied Himself *becoming* what was not God, became fully human, *knowing us from the inside*. Empathy.

As we also consider how battered many Americans are feeling by the social and cultural calamities of our age, what if we did what Dunbar does with that "caged bird"? What if we practiced our divinely given capacity to know others from their inside? What if we resolved during Advent *to practice empathy* not for a group but for particular people, perhaps even three of them. It would be godlike for us to know why he or she *feels* as he or she does... to know why he or she *beats* his or her life against constraint ... and to know why he or she *sings*.