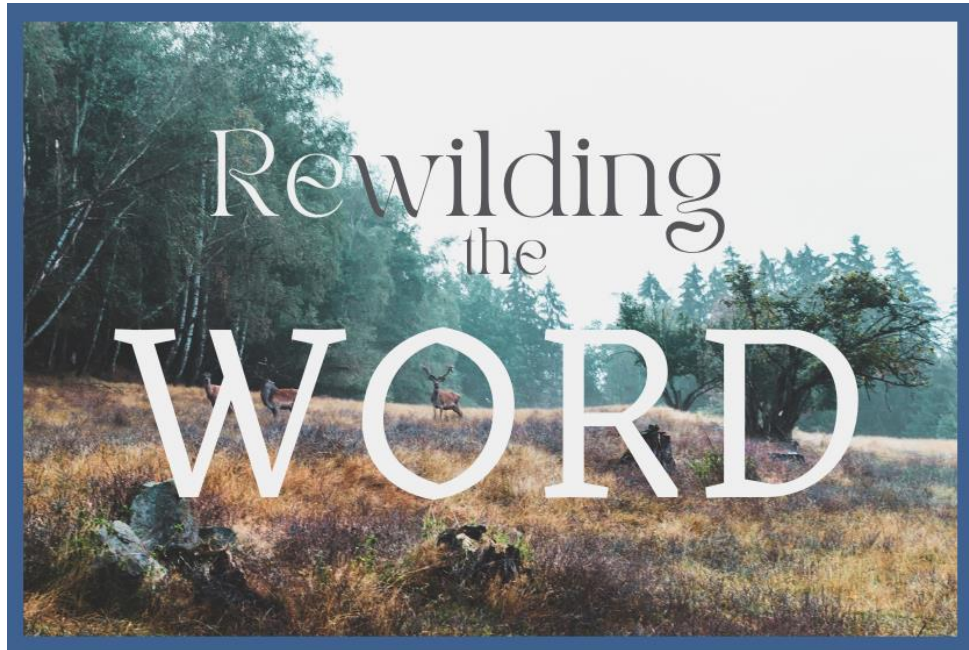

GANZ - #6 - REWILDING THE WORD (JANUARY 2024)



A Story

During the years of my formal schooling and up into my 30s, I did not understand why I could not get access to Poetry; why it would not open to me.¹ My parents taught all of us Ganz children to read, and to read all the time, barring access to the TV that we might grow in affection for books. They taught us well, doing that teaching in the most compelling way by themselves reading all the time.

Yet, I could not figure out why Poetry was a locked box to me, the key to which was never placed into my hands. What *was* such a key?

Even when I and my high school classmates were taught poetry in our English classes, I only encountered *poems*. My teachers came at them as if they were word-riddles to be

¹ I am referring here not to how a poem is constructed. By Poetry I mean the experience of Poetry; the effects in the one receiving a poem. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “**poetry**”: **2.a. - c1395 -** Composition in verse or some comparable patterned arrangement of language in which **the expression of feelings and ideas** is given intensity by the use of distinctive style and rhythm; the art of such a composition. Traditionally associated with explicit formal departure from the patterns of ordinary speech or prose, e.g. in the use of elevated diction, figurative language, and syntactical reordering.

solved, whose meaning was elusive. What I came to conclude was that poets sought to be obscure and that their productions required a specific set of tools (a key) to “solve” or to “decipher” their meaning *correctly*.²

Many people I know, perhaps most of the people I know, are afraid of Poetry, who judge that poems are “beyond” them, out of their range of skill to read, let alone to enjoy them.

I wonder if this is true for you.

One day – I recall that it was in the late afternoon – I was doing a Yoga sequence after having returned from a long run. I had sounding from my radio the “Afternoon Edition” of NPR (National Public Radio). A feature that afternoon was an interview with the poet Sharon Olds,³ who had recently published her collection called *The Gold Cell* (I just checked: published 12 February 1987 – I was 32-years old). As the segment concluded, the interviewer asked Olds to read one of the poems in that collection. She chose to read the first poem. And there, right then, as I listened, I heard, for the first time, *poetry* ... and not just a *poem*. I knew that I had been changed, a capacity to hear given me that had not existed up to that moment – the key into my hands. What that “key” is remains to me a mystery. All I know is that before that day I could not hear and after that day I could.

And so it was that Sharon Olds’ book was the first book of poetry that I purchased for myself (other than the ones that we had been required to purchase as students for high school classes). I read the entire collection, feeling grow in me a capacity to hear *poetry*.

In the following poem, I will attend closely to particular words, so that through the “opening” of the words and how they are placed in the poem, we may together begin to gain access to the poetry of this poem. Such attention to particular words lies at the heart of the practice of our *Rewilding the Word* essays.

² The point of a poem is not to understand it *correctly*, but to understand it *sufficiently*. What a particular poem means depends significantly on who is reading the poem and when and in what context.

³ Sharon Olds was born in 1942, in San Francisco, and educated at Stanford University and Columbia University. Her first book of poems, *Satan Says* (1980), received the inaugural San Francisco Poetry Center Award. Her second, *The Dead and the Living*, was both the Lamont Poetry Selection for 1983 and winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award. She teaches poetry workshops in the Graduate Creative Writing Program at New York University and in the N.Y.U. workshop program at Goldwater Hospital on Roosevelt Island in New York. More recently she was awarded the Walt Whitman Citation for Merit by the New York State Writers Institute of the State University of New York. The citation officially invested her with the title of New York State Poet for 1998-2000.

A Text – “The Summer Day” by Mary Oliver (1935-2019)⁴

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This⁵ grasshopper, I mean –
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down –
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

A Reading

“Who ... Who ... Who?”⁶ – By the repetition of this interrogative pronoun at the opening of each of the first three lines, the poet emphasizes her desire to know the Maker more than to know what the Maker made: World, Swan, Black Bear, etc. Current sensibilities suggest that it is smart to ask that the Maker stand forth and reveal Himself when summoned. We humans are fond of interrogating God and expressing our

⁴ From her collection *House of Light* (Beacon Press, 1990). From *Vanity Fair* magazine (17 January 2019) – “Billy Collins, the United States’ poet laureate from 2001 to 2003, published an anthology called *Poetry 180: A Poem a Day for American High Schools*. Collins included “The Summer Day” in the first edition (No. 133), raising a generation of American kids with her meditation on a grasshopper. Or, as Krista Tippett put it to Oliver during a 2015 interview for her *On Being* podcast, “so many young people, I mean, young and old, have learned that poem by heart. And it has become part of them.”

⁵ I added this emphasis – the italics.

⁶ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**who**” – “Used in asking the identity of a person or persons specified, indicated, or understood; what or which person or people. Corresponding to *what* that is used of things.”

expectations of Him. And her three-fold “Who” suggests that she insists that the Maker reply.

“made ... made ... made” – Another three-fold repetition. We might have expected the poet to use the word “created” rather than “made” because she is asking (Is she not?) about God, the Creator. (Traditionally, we say that God *creates* and that human beings *make*.)⁷ But Mary Oliver is a poet, a maker.⁸ What interests her is not *that* something exists in the first place (“created”) but *how exactly* did the Maker make each marvelous and wondrous thing. To ask *how* something is made is a quite a different question from asking *why* it exists. This poet, I think, is interested to know who, but only in order that she might learn HOW the wondrous Maker makes – a poet asking *the* Poet.

“This” – The most important word in the poem. It marks a definitive shift of attention away from *conceptualizations* of or about reality and toward a *specific example* of reality – in this case, a grasshopper. The way to get to the Maker (the Who? Who? Who?) is by concentrating on a particular making: the specificity of a particular grasshopper.

We follow the poet’s attention as it zooms in on *this* grasshopper, as if taking us with her through a magnifying glass. She marks details about this delicate being. They suggest that she, the grasshopper, has a fully developed, even sophisticated, *personality*, characterized by gazing and fastidiously⁹ washing up her face, a girl with an elegant capacity to “snap open” her wings and to “float” away. We guess that this grasshopper finds us who are watching her less developed, less sophisticated than she. She has a confident self-possession that feels almost dismissive: “Come back when you get enormous and complicated eyes and have learned how to fly. Then we can talk.”

“I do know how to pay attention” – The poet seems reticent¹⁰ to equate *paying attention* and *prayer* (to the Maker – the Who). Yet it is one of the most insightful remarks that I have encountered about the nature of prayer. Too much in the general understanding of

⁷ When God *creates*, we are noticing how things that never existed are suddenly there, made to exist by God’s choice and out of God’s profoundly rich imagination. When humans *make* things, we mean the way that we use what is already here (what exists) and build or make things *out of* these already existent things.

⁸ The *Oxford English Dictionary* records the etymology of the noun “poet” – “< **ancient Greek** ποιητής, early variant of ποιητής **maker, author, poet.**”

⁹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**fastidious**” – **3.a., ?1555** – Scrupulously or minutely concerned with refinement in matters of taste or propriety; having exacting standards or paying meticulous attention to detail; (now sometimes) *spec.* very concerned about standards of cleanliness; insistent that things are kept very clean and tidy.

¹⁰ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**reticent**” – **1.a. – 1825** – Reluctant or disinclined to speak out or express personal thoughts and feelings freely; reserved in speech; given to silence or concealment.

prayer is about *what we are doing* in it (techniques, methods, etc.); not nearly enough about *what God is doing* in the world and about all of us *growing in our ability to catch on* to the work of God – the divine mission of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the world. Our ability to praise God, to give glory to God, is proportionate to our ability *to pay attention to God*, perceiving what God is up to.

Yes, liturgically and congregationally we can say or sing words, lots of them, even loudly. Yes, personally we can say our prayers, eloquent words and heartfelt. Yes, we can carefully arrange our bodily posture and get our gestures just right. Yes, we can set a time, daily, to pray and stick to it. But all of that, unless we are careful, can actually blunt not sharpen our perception of what God has done, what God is doing, and what God is likely to do in a circumstance about to reveal itself.

The highest theological point of the Catholic Eucharist (the Mass, the Liturgy, are other names for it) happens when we say, all together and aloud, “*Through Him, with Him, and in Him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor are Yours, forever and ever!*” Any prayer must finally be about *increasing our capacity to notice God*, and in noticing Him, to respond to what He is doing (we call it “the Kingdom of God”) with reverence and admiration and availability.

John 5 (NJB): ¹⁹ To this Jesus replied:⁸

In all truth I tell you,
by himself the Son can do nothing;
he can do only what he sees the Father doing:
and whatever the Father does the Son does too.*

²⁰ For the Father loves the Son
and shows him everything he himself does,
and he will show him even greater things than these,
works that will astonish you.* ¹¹

An Action

When we *pay attention* to a person (such an interesting expression – “to pay”), whom we judge that we know well – “I do know how to pay attention” – on what aspect of him or her does our focus rest? It seems an odd question. But I do not think that people ever

* 8:28–29

* 3:35; 10:17

¹¹ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Jn 5:19–20.

consider what exactly in a person “holds” their attention – his or her face?; the tone and modulation of his or her voice?; a particular way his or her eyes are?; a way he or she holds his or her body?; his or her smell?; a characteristic gesture? Being able to get to that, to what holds our attention, and to wonder about that, is one thing.

But here is the spiritual exercise, the action that I am suggesting here. What if by deliberate choice we redirected our attention to some other “location” in that person? *For example*, if you have regularly had your attention held by his or her face, then “re-locate” your attention, say, to his or her hands. What if you concentrated your attention on his or her hands, seeing whether over time you began to understand him or her differently. Recall that what held Jesus’ attention when he engaged a person (a tax collector, a leper, a woman, a Roman centurion, etc.) was nearly always (always?) different from what held the attention of everyone else – “Simon, do you *see* this woman?”.