
GANZ - LENTEN MEDITATION FOR SECOND WEEK OF LENT 2025



The Grave of Emily Dickinson at West Cemetery, Amherst, Massachusetts

Jane Hirschfield, born in New York City (1953). "I don't think poetry is based just on poetry; it is based on a thoroughly lived life. And so, I couldn't just decide I was going to write no matter what; I first had to find out what it means to *live*."

Steve Jobs once said, "Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking that you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart."

Scripture¹ – Luke 9:28-36 – the Transfiguration of the Christ

²⁷ 'I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.' ²⁸ Now about eight days after this had been said, he took with him Peter, John and James and went up the mountain to pray. ²⁹ And it happened that, as he was praying, the aspect of his face was changed and his clothing became sparkling white.²

I do not know the name of the film technique, but it is one that is deployed all the time in movies. We see the characters in a scene looking toward something that we, the viewers, cannot yet see. The Director wants us first to "see" that something *in the reactions* on the faces of the characters who are looking at it. When this technique is used, we experience a compelling need *to see what they are seeing*: "Quit showing us their faces; turn the camera around and let us look too!"

On that night (I am convinced that this happened at night after they had been all day among the crowds below), those three closest friends of Jesus saw, indirectly, what Jesus, as well as Moses and Elijah, were beholding – the very heart of God, the Trinitarian relationships. St. John of the Cross in his poem *The Living Flame of Love*³ wrote:

3. O lamps of fire!
in whose splendors
the deep caverns of feeling,
once obscure and blind,
now give forth, so rarely, so exquisitely,
both warmth and light to their Beloved.

4. How gently and lovingly

¹ This is the Gospel being read in Catholic churches today on the 2nd Sunday of Lent.

² [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Lk 9:27-29.

³ As was his custom with his major poems, St. John of the Cross includes with it his extensive and profound commentary on its meaning.

you wake in my heart,
where in secret you dwell alone;
and in your sweet breathing,
filled with good and glory,
how tenderly you swell my heart with love.⁴

The disciples saw the Trinity *first* in the reaction on the faces, and in the very being, of Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Perhaps the disciples felt an urgency flare in them (but only after they had moved through the terror that had overcome them up there on the mountain) causing them to ask Jesus: "Please, let us see too what you were seeing?" Or as later the apostle Philip requested:

John14 (NJB): ⁸ Philip said, 'Lord, show us the Father, and then we shall be satisfied.' Jesus said to him, ⁹ 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?⁵

Perhaps later, when those three asked Jesus about what had happened, Jesus replied, "You are missing the point by being preoccupied with what you saw happen to me, in me, and through me up there. What I wanted to show you was the Father, my Father and yours, whose Face I am always beholding – "*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.*" Pray that my Father will grant you to see what I see."

2 Corinthians 3 (NJB): ¹⁵ As it is, to this day, whenever Moses is read, their hearts are covered with a veil, ¹⁶ and this veil will not be taken away till they turn to the Lord. ¹⁷ Now this Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸ **And all of us, with our unveiled faces like mirrors reflecting the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the image that we reflect in brighter and brighter glory; this is the working of the Lord who is the Spirit.** ⁶

Such a striking scene from the life of Christ! I suggest that we are not meant to pay attention to *the light*, the effulgence on the face and clothes of Christ (by far the most

⁴ St. John of the Cross, [*The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*](#), trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, Third Edition. (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2017), 640. The are the last two stanzas of "The Living Flame of Love". As to what this "flame" is, John of the Cross comments, p. 641: "**This flame of love is the Spirit of its Bridegroom, who is the Holy Spirit.** The soul feels Her within itself not only as a fire that has consumed and transformed it, but as a fire that burns and flares within it, as I mentioned. And that flame, every time it flares up, bathes the soul in glory and refreshes it with the quality of divine life."

⁵ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Jn 14:8-9.

⁶ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), 2 Co 3:15-18.

striking aspect of this scene – that glorious light!) but to *the physical expression of his body* as it reacts to, responds to the everlasting Light.

Yet in thy dark streets shineth
the everlasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight.⁷

Did He suddenly look up with eyes wide open, or turn His head looking fiercely into the faces of His three best friends? What was the change the disciples noticed happening on His face – from what expression to what? What did they see in His eyes? What was the change they heard in His voice? What were the movements of His arms and hands? Were His arms opening out with palms open, a gesture of surprise and welcome? Were they pulled in with hands over His heart as if profoundly moved by something, and feeling that intensely, His heart racing? Did He suddenly fall to His knees – an obvious change of posture? Was His face mobile and bright, and his voice musical with laughter, mouth open and teeth flashing and head thrown back?

A Poem - Emily Dickinson, #479⁸

A note about reading an Emily Dickinson poem: There is a quality of reality that comes through when reading her poems – the rhythm in them; the puzzle of them. One does not need to “figure out” what she *means* to be significantly affected by what she is able to convey. I feel her fierceness, confidence, and startling freedom of spirit come through way before I, by careful attention to each word and line, begin to “catch her drift.” So, before you feel daunted by this poem, enjoy it. The scholar A. Habegger noted: “She freely ignored the usual rules of versification and even of grammar, and in the intellectual content of her work she likewise proved exceptionally bold and original. Her verse is distinguished by its epigrammatic compression, haunting personal voice, enigmatic brilliance, and lack of high polish.”

⁷ Phillips Brooks, “O Little Town of Bethlehem”, from the first stanza.

⁸ *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*, edited by R.W. Franklin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: the Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999. Alfred Habegger in *Britannica* – “Readers respond, too, to the impression her poems convey of a haunting private life, one marked by extremes of deprivation and refined ecstasies. At the same time, her rich abundance – her great range of feeling, her supple expressiveness – testifies to an intrinsic poetic genius. Widely translated into Japanese, Italian, French, German, and many other languages, Dickinson has begun to strike readers as the one American lyric poet who belongs in the pantheon with Sappho [610-570 BCE], Catullus [84-54 BCE], Sa’di [1213-1291], the Shakespeare [1564-1616] of the sonnets, Rainer Maria Rilke [1875-1926], and Arthur Rimbaud [1854-1891].”

Because I could not stop for Death -
He kindly stopped for me -
The Carriage held but just Ourselves -
And Immortality.

We slowly drove -
He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility -

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess-in the Ring -
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain -
We passed the Setting Sun -

Or rather - He passed Us -
The Dews drew quivering and Chill -
For only Gossamer, my Gown -
My Tippet - only Tulle -

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground -
The Roof was scarcely visible -
The Cornice - in the Ground -

Since then - 'tis Centuries - and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity -

Observations and Insights -

"Because I could not stop for Death" - In this "denial of death"⁹ world in which we live, we might have expected her to write "would not stop" or even "will not stop", rather than "could not stop".

In a proper Christian understanding of Life, Death is not an enemy of our human nature, but the created means by which we can finally and fully define what each of us

⁹ Wikipedia notes: "*The Denial of Death* is a Pulitzer Prize winning book in 1973 by American cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker, which discusses the psychological and philosophical implications of how people and cultures have reacted to the concept of death. The author argues most human action is taken to ignore or avoid the inevitability of death."

made of the life that was given us. Death for us is Life considered under the aspect of its ability to be completed; the work of Art now finished; the “thread” found and not lost – John 19: 30 After Jesus had taken the wine he said, ‘It is fulfilled’; and bowing his head he gave up his spirit.¹⁰

William Stafford, “The Way it Is” (opening lines) –

There’s a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn’t change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.

Consider a novel and how its last chapter does not “kill” the story being told, it does not void the novel of its meaning, rendering it a waste of time, but rather it brings the novel to its memorable and satisfying completion. We, the readers, finally grasp the whole arc of the great story – beginning, middle, and end.

Ephesians 2 (NJB): ¹⁰ We are God’s work of art, created in Christ Jesus for the good works which God has already designated to make up our way of life.¹¹

Perhaps Dickinson, a composer of 1,800 poems, and perhaps any writer, is constantly *practicing death* when he or she recognizes that his or her written essay or poem or novel is done, and lets it be done.

For a writer to accept this “enough”, to recognize and to accept the completion shown him or her in the text – the story or poem or play or novel tells the author where it wants to go - spares him or her from the dreary vulgarity of a story or poem or sermon or speech unable to find its end.

It is the refusal of an end not the acceptance of it that vacates a story or poem or novel or sermon ... *or a life* of its meaning. Perhaps this is why Dickinson uses the word “kindly” for Death, conveying to us its striking courtesy.

“Ourselves – And Immortality” – We are intrigued that the poet wrote “Immortality” and not “– Mortality” as we might have expected in a poem in which Death is so prominent a character. In this “Carriage” there are three passengers ... unless either Immortality or Death is the one driving the Carriage for the other two. If they both are passengers with her, then we are left wondering, first, who is driving the Carriage and, second, we are struck that the poet associates Death and Immortality as fellow travelers,

¹⁰ [The New Jerusalem Bible](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Jn 19:30.

¹¹ [The New Jerusalem Bible](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Eph 2:10.

as if they belonged together, each serving the interests of each other, rather than cancelling each other out. Our Christian poet understands how and why they belong together and not as enemies.

“The Dews drew quivering and Chill” – No one can be non-emotional about his or her own death. The poet, in an earlier line of this poem, had just ridden by those heedless children at play,

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess - in the Ring -

who are completely unaware of their mortality. But now the Carriage carries the poet past a cemetery. Suddenly she experiences the “quivering and Chill” of her *mortality* experienced as unavoidable. She lacks clothing capable of keeping her warm against the attack of this existential fear.¹² In her emotions, Death appears as coldly impersonal. But then the closing lines of the poem:

I first surmised the Horses’ Heads
Were toward Eternity -

Prayer: “O God, who have commanded us to listen to your beloved Son, be pleased, we pray, to nourish us inwardly by your word, that with spiritual sight made pure, we may rejoice to behold your glory.”

¹² The “**quivering**” refers to the “Dews”, which suggests that the air moving by the Carriage causes the dew drops on its surface to “quiver” in place – the Poet keeps us aware of the movement of the Carriage to the West – “the Sun passed us”. However, “quivering” also evokes the Poet who has gotten chilled, who is *shivering*. But following the reading of **Vendler (2012)**, perhaps we are meant to associate “quivering” with FEAR, mortal fear, that Death, who at first seemed “kindly” and “Civil” has brought her close, too close now not just to an *idea* of Death, but to *her* death. She is becoming frightened.