

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



Excerpt from *Desiderata*

Go placidly amid the noise and haste,
and remember what peace there may be in silence.
As far as possible without surrender
be on good terms with all persons.
Speak your truth quietly and clearly;
and listen to others,
even the dull and the ignorant;
they too have their story.

...

Take kindly the counsel of the years,
gracefully surrendering the things of youth.
Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune.
But do not distress yourself with dark imaginings.
Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness.
Beyond a wholesome discipline,
be gentle with yourself.

You are a child of the universe,
no less than the trees and the stars;
you have a right to be here.
And whether or not it is clear to you,
no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.

Max Ehrmann¹

Reflections

I would bet that when I read this poem in graduate school, or even more recently than that, I turned my nose up at its cheerfulness, its accessibility, its optimism; I probably accused it of being too easy and wrote it off as preachy, prescriptive, sanctimonious. But I realize this kind of dismissal is a mistake: one of the great lessons I have learned from reading poetry is that it is a fault to confuse clarity and simplicity, just as it is a fault to assume that *because* something is obscure or abstract, it is therefore smart. It doesn't work like that and I think Voltaire's dictum is true: "One always begins with the simple, then comes the complex, and by superior enlightenment one often reverts in the end to the simple. Such is the course of human intelligence."

¹ "Desiderata" by Max Ehrmann. Public Domain.

I read an article this summer about the often misperceived difficulty of poetry. The writer, Matthew Zapruder, says in his article (titled “Understanding Poetry Is More Straightforward Than You Think”), “as much as we might have enjoyed reading (and writing) poetry when we were children, in school we are taught that poetry is inherently ‘difficult,’ and that by its very nature it somehow makes meaning by *hiding* meaning.” Of course, poetry at its best reveals rather than obscures, delights rather than frustrates. I often felt that part of my work as a teacher was as much an undoing of learned patterns—that poetry is somehow like a riddle, that things are hidden, that literary gratification is only available to some scholarly elite—as it was a retraining for pleasure. And it was a more difficult challenge than I first realized to convince my students that reading is meant to open us up to new ways of thinking—about words, ideas, questions; its goal is to make us *more*, not less, imaginative and often the whole point of the enterprise is to realize we cannot come to any conclusion at all.

“Desiderata”—a word meaning “things wanted or needed,” from the Latin for “things desired”—is an illustrative and exemplary poem. Again, the lesson: clarity is not the opposite of mystery. Grammatically speaking, some of the simplest sentences I know in the English language—“I love you”; “Jesus wept”; “God is love”—have depths that will take a lifetime to mine. And this poem feels as rich. It also strikes me as an excellent meditation to begin a new series of *Wellspring* reflections, with a special intention to make room for silence, to desire peace, to be gentle with myself and others, to trust in the unfolding and, in spite of the noise and haste, to listen well, without distraction.

Of course if we wish to complicate matters, the poem raises all kinds of unanswerable questions: What is the heart’s difference in want and need? If fear is born of fatigue, how are we ever to rest? When is it necessary to speak a truth loudly? How are we to have any control over “dark imaginings”? But these are questions that, even in their darkness, give me pleasure: I am reminded that the issues of human experience are not that many and we are more similar than we are different. Poems like this one help me believe more fully that the order of things—the universe—is indeed “unfolding as it should.”

✠ About the Poet

Max Ehrmann (September 26, 1872 – September 9, 1945) was an American writer, poet, and attorney from Terre Haute, Indiana, educated at Harvard University, and widely known for his 1927 poem “Desiderata.” Ehrmann was of German descent; both his parents emigrated from Bavaria in the 1840s.



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