

Wordsworth Lights the Way

Scientists recently discovered what is believed to be the Higgs boson, the so-called “God” particle. According to theory, the particle, by way of its Higgs field, gives all things mass. The discovery of the Higgs boson particle neither proves nor disproves the existence of God.

My grandma told me that I was born with an *old soul*. I believe her. At age seven while other children followed the Pavlovian jingle of the ice cream truck, I puzzled over things like life’s Beginning’s beginning. That summer, I remember asking my mom who created God. She answered as well as I ever could—with heavy uncertainty and general perplexity--and the temptation of unknowable things, of unanswerable questions was born to remain with me for a very long time.

When I first read William Wordsworth’s “Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,” I was 17. I have never quite put it down. From the opening lines, it is an elegiac promise of a world beyond our own, a romantic treatise on possibility in the vastness. And, yes, it works as a series of proposals against some of the unknowable elements of human existence.

Indeed, the body is both a lamentation and a celebration of the cyclical nature of life, of the notion that our starting and finishing points are the same. Inside is the promise that we can return to the days of “*splendor in the grass, of glory in the flower.*” The ode has become a mystical place, one full of loose ends and possibilities--a land of mysteries, revelations, and even peace.

Perhaps beautiful writing is an enduring catalyst, a push and pull of mood and tenor, asking us to make sense of senseless things, to lift the veil of doubt that overlays life. If we are lucky, this type of writing moves with us, transforming our world, our interpretation of it, and, in the process, us. The first line that resonated was simple, but connotative.

“In years that bring the philosophic mind.”

I do not recall the moment that it occurred, but somehow old soul knitted to Wordsworth’s apparently seasoned philosophic mind. If it would take years to acquire wisdom, then maybe time is its antecedent. I had beaten time by sheer old soul status.

Thus, the outcast—too old and too young for her age—found a place in Wordsworth’s world. I became part of the fabric of uncertainties that teased at larger things, ineffable matters that appealed to a childhood call to order, to solve, and to unravel. My love affair with the poem had begun.

For reasons now unknown, I began to hypothesize that some level of incalculable suffering prefaced full development of the philosophic mind. *No pain, no gain* my track coach had chided. Perhaps the soul required an analogous journey to reach its actualization.

Later, I would realize that a philosophic mind is quite different than originally supposed, not so much worn down by tragedy as resiliently optimistic. It does not appear to spring out of suffering. The relationship is symbiotic not causal.

I would receive many opportunities to sharpen my *philosophic* mind. When I was twenty-five, a diminutive Chihuahua named Bobbies was the first in a series of losses. He had arrived in my home when I was thirteen. While I was tough on myself, Bobbies was tender. He loved equally in moments of victory and failure. His exuberant reception of me, all of me--good and bad—changed me. I had been an overachiever and a perfectionist. The seemingly simple friendship had shown me an unconditional component to love.

First Loss, as an experience, is visceral. It tunnels in and hollows out all of those filters that convince us that we are invincible, that our worlds will remain the same, and that endings are figments of an imaginary universal order. Bobbies' death proved that no amount of love protects from the growing shadow. Death will come invited or not. It will endure as an integral part of a cycle that runs too long or too short and, in rare coincidences, just long enough. She will stand as an exasperatingly nonsensical signpost of logic's limits, illuminating the fragility of all things, the limits of conscious life, of physical being.

I returned to unanswerable questions: *What if life is a long journey intercepted by periodic loss, a march of sorts into solitude?*

This guess, far from inducing melancholy, instead acted as a refuge from the rough unpredictability of being. There was a course ahead and its twists and turns were structurally knowable. Certainly I would lose loved ones. This much was inevitable. The knowledge acted as a complement to all of its unknowable elements—the who, the when, the how.

Years later, when my dad died at the age of 52 of cancer—an insidious thing that claimed him in an act of defiance and cowardice--I revisited the poem that had slept inside of me since graduate school.

*O joy! That in our embers
Is something that doth live
That nature yet remembers
What was so fugitive!*

Dad, with his throttling bare-chested midnight thundering on his Harley, was gone, blurred into the horizon. In these lines, he was with me again, a renegade from Life's *before consciousness* starting point and a maverick returning to it. The word "fugitive" was perfect, a fulcrum term indicating not just a loss of something wild and free, but a triumphant return to it. The poem was his as well.

Wordsworth had rendered death strangely conquerable.

My mom followed my dad when she was 53. She had described removal from her demons (of which there were some) as "waking from a dream." Two years later, she fell asleep never to wake again. The neighbors knew her as the platform shoed woman with a dog in her arms and an unforgettable kindness. For years after she died, I would encounter people who had met her and within minutes confided in her. This level of trust in a stranger struck them. They barely knew her and yet knew her in a rare wholehearted gamble on the intuition of knowing. I returned intuitively to Wordsworth. In a thinly lit hospital room with wan moonlight a ghost in the window, I found these words:

Another race hath been, and other palms are won.

Thanks to the human heart by which we live

Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears

To me the meanest flower that blows can give

Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

There was no need for the book any longer. The 203-line poem had been committed to memory. I did not cry for a long time after my mom died. Maybe there is a heartache that sinks and settles so far beneath the surface that nothing can find it. It is too far into an unknown and somber place to be retrieved then or maybe ever.

Just prior to her passing, my mom regularly remembered Coalinga, her city of birth and of childhood, a place with such attachment to wonder that it seemed almost fictional, a seemingly conjured memory to reassure her in days of darkness. Perhaps she was still able to connect with the divine seminal chemistry that most of us forget long before the shadow of middle age falls on us.

*Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind;
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be;
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering;
In the faith that looks through death*

Does my mom breathe again in a bliss that vaguely existed before she traveled there and now rolls on for eternity? Does the last breath free the soul to map its way to the starting point, a heaven of sorts?

There is opportunity in Wordsworth's romantic intellectualization of things, in our deconstruction of them, in molding them into a set of theories to unfetter the heart, especially in its most desperate moments of need.

In this light, my would-be philosophic mind would appreciate that there is no such thing as death in any traditional sense, certainly not the smoky ethereal dragon that my childhood mind attempted to slay. There is no need for reason or logic, would-be blankets to the chill of unknowing. The answers are unnecessary. The march into solitude is only hard on those that dread it. Those that depart from us simply travel from this temporal home to another more permanent one.

If Wordsworth and I are wrong, I am forever incapable of knowing it. The wave will engulf me long before I can become conscious of the error. For now, I will cling to recollections of a place that I have forgotten and known with a steady resolve to awake there again, surrounded by all that I have lost along the way.

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