

**EMILY DICKINSON AND MARY MAGDALENE: SOLITUDE'S VISION
MARK 15: 33-41; EXCERPTS FROM DICKINSON'S POETRY
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Last summer we got back to Lake Winnepesaukee after a year's absence. The first thing I did after the car was unpacked was go to the front porch, sit down and look out at the serene lake surrounded by pine trees, under the dome of a crystal clear blue sky.

Then I realized some of the burdens I'd been lugging around weren't there. I felt lighter, freer, clearer. So clear that several questions I'd been mulling leaped from my subconscious unannounced like feeding trout and found satisfying answers lying on the surface of my consciousness.

It's amazing what getting away can do for you. I'm sure many of you have had similar experiences when your inner vision was calm and clear.

Clarity of thought and vision is one of the things Emily Dickinson and Mary Magdalene share in common.

When Jesus healed Mary exorcising eight demons from her she instantly became a follower. My hunch is her following Jesus was not just about gratitude. It was about seeing him as the way, the truth and the life after the demons were gone.

A word about demons. The term is current in our language as in facing our demons. Whether demons are external (the view of antiquity) or internal (the view of modernity) the point is they distract us from the truth about ourselves and life. The demon who met Jesus in the wilderness sought to distract him from his mission and relationship to God. Mary's demons complicated her life in ways she didn't realize until they were gone.

In addition to clarity is Mary's utter concentration on and response to Jesus: washing his feet; witnessing his crucifixion; going to prepare his body for burial; encountering him in the garden. Her attentiveness to Jesus is in contrast to the disciples' blindness to him in their midst and taking him for granted.

Emily Dickinson too possessed an uncanny clarity about her life, about the truth of the world, she too maintained an utter concentration and focus on God.

So acute was her concentration on God that one famous literary critic said she was a member of a religious sect of one, referring to herself as the Empress of Calvary where, like Mary, she was a faithful witness to the human suffering of Jesus.

The result of her undisturbed clarity and concentration is the sense you get that her poems strip the human experience to its bare essentials in all of its pain and illusion. She sees and offers to us a "naked" world, disrobed of disguise and cover-up.

She was the antithesis of Whitman her only other peer in American verse. While he was expansive, she was diminutive. He the classic extrovert, she the introvert.

Her wit, keen phrase, brevity and exact focus correspond to his eloquence, prosody, and vast view of life. He of thunderous and wave-like proclamation; she of incisive observation and questioning.

In fact, this ability to question as if there were a God despite evidence to the contrary, rather than concluding that no God exists at all, is one of her great gifts.

And yet, her laser-like observation left her as she said “wrecked and alone.” She typically found herself in places most of the rest of us don’t have the rigor or courage to go even if we could – barring some life crisis to transport us there.

Alfred Kazin put it this way, he said, she is willing to love the God with whom she is at war making her a closer spiritual heir to Jonathan Edwards than anyone else. She lived the dialectic of the old Puritan religion: the minutely observing self under God’s all-seeing eye. Yet, what makes her modern and refreshing is that she does not posit a faith where there is merely longing for one. In her solitary sect she was more conceptually original than Milton or Blake, superseded critics say, only by Shakespeare among all poets in the English language.^[i]

“If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold that no fire ever can warm me,” she said, “I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it, is there any other way?”^[ii]

Her poems unite form and idea; like a piece of ice, said Robert Frost, on a hot stove, her poems ride on their own melting.

Making the word become flesh she was remarkably out of sync with Whitman’s new direction in American poetry, using, even extending, the use of metrical and rhyme patterns. Exact rhymes, eye rhymes, identical rhymes, vowel rhymes, imperfect rhymes, suspended rhymes.^[iii] Her poems are blithely anachronistic in American letters.

In contrast to her two great contemporaries Emerson and Whitman “she wrote as if she were bargaining for her life, line after line, not as an infinite soul.”^[iv]

More existentialist than her famous Transcendentalist and Romantic peers, she loved to begin her poems with “I”: I am afraid to own a Body; I am alive; I can wade Grief; I dwell in Possibility.^[v]

Her subject matter ranges from intensely personal reactions to the seasons; to the nuances of her morale; to the coming and going of people; to death in particular and especially during that most productive time of her writing 1862-1863 when so many Amherst boys were brought home in caskets from the Civil War.^[vi]

That is where she grew up—Amherst, Massachusetts—where her father was a banker, one-time congressman and officer of Amherst College which his father founded.

She lived in her parents’ home, her brother and his family next door; she occupied a small room on the second floor looking out onto the yard and street. Other than attending Mt. Holyoke Seminary for Girls and making a few trips to Boston, she spent her days encapsulated in that quaint circumspect perch of a bedroom.

It was in this space that she scribed nearly 1800 poems, tied them in bundles in shoe boxes, not titling but numbering them in order and stored them in her chest of drawers. Unlike Walt who published his writings, Emily kept hers from public view only to be discovered after her death.

For all of her counterpoint to Whitman they had in common this paradox: their connection to the times in which they lived but also their freedom from social structures and expectations.

Whitman transcended the limitations of his world by raising the endless possibilities for each human life; Dickinson while shutting herself inside her childhood family constellation was liberated. Her self-imposed exile, indoors, emancipated her from all the regimentation and ritual of social order.

She conducted, with Gertrude Stein, UB's Susan Howe says, a skillful and ironic investigation of patriarchal authority over literary history. Who polices questions of grammar, parts of speech, and connotation? Whose order is shut inside the structure of a sentence? She built a new poetic form from her fractured sense of dwelling eternally on intellectual borders, while confident masculine voices buzzed an alluring and inaccessible discourse... This sheltered woman audaciously invented a new grammar grounded in humility and hesitation.^[vii]

What fascinated her and connects her not just to Edwards but Kierkegaard is the coming of death. It is embracing and exploring this awareness that is her religious practice. "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—/The Stillness in the Room/Was like the Stillness in the Air—/Between the Heaves of Storm."

Referring to herself as Empress Circumference, a strange designation, she resonates with Emerson's, "The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end."

Her Empress Circumference echoes St. Augustine too whose theology is the basis for her Calvinist heritage. Augustine described the nature of God as a circle whose center was everywhere and its *circumference* nowhere.

Could it be that Dickinson thought of herself and her poetic life as the monarch of a noble process: the pursuit "of apprehension, of understanding [which] involves circling" as her poems do? "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—/Success in *Circuit* lies/Too bright for our infirm delight/The Truth's superb surprise."

What made her so remarkable was her relentlessness, once begun it had no end: for "every circle achieved by understanding proves itself merely the boundary for a new understanding to traverse."^[viii]

We get the sense in her poems of the unrelieved pitch of crisis that sent them forth.^[ix] "One need not be a Chamber—to be Haunted—/One need not be a House—/The Brain has Corridors—surpassing/Material Place."

Yet, even with despair nipping at her heels her poems were 'leaps of faith' following trajectories different from the self-consuming darkness that threatened her. "The abdication of Belief/Makes the Behavior small—/Better an ignis fatuus/Than no illume at all."

She was so conscious of what was missing of what need not be said that a sense of absence serves not only to condense her poems but as her best punctuation.

"Some things that stay there be—/Grief—Hills—Eternity—/Nor this behooveth me/There are that resting, rise./Can I expound the skies?/How still the riddle lies!"

And just when you think she is caught in the vice of despair and that her frail frame will expire under the weight of life's most burdensome questions she jettisons forth in some new direction not unlike Mary Magdalene in the Garden. Looking for the body of Jesus, Mary encountered the Gardner: "Sir, tell me where you have taken him and I will come and get his body."

And in that long moment before Jesus replies we are held suspended by the drama of John's Gospel until he says, "Mary." and recognizing his voice she exclaims, "Rabbouni!"

I wonder if Emily Dickinson didn't have such moments herself. Moments when she recognized truth and the joyful proclamation that wells up unsolicited from us when we do. "There came a Day at Summer's full,/Entirely for me—/I thought that such were for the Saints/Where Resurrections—be."

Here it is summer—perhaps a day as full of this season as the one Dickinson experienced when she wrote that line. Yet, some of us are perhaps on the cusp of despair while others traverse into the realm of calm and solitude or still others a new land of struggle or joy.

What can we take away from Emily Dickinson's life and poems to live out our days? The principle of "hanging in there" even when life deals you a bushel of lemons or a frightening diagnosis or a broken relationship or some piece of bad news is not an insignificant gift of this great American poet.

We can't force or bribe or intimidate life. But we can embrace it, like she did—rain or shine, good and bad. We can dwell in solitude watching, waiting until in some Garden of despair we too are first surprised then transformed by God's wonder and awe.

Maybe that's her gift to us today: the willingness to trust until, as C.S. Lewis said, we are surprised by joy and life blossoms again. Or as Emily said:

"I can wade Grief—/whole Pools of it—/I'm used to that—/But the least push of Joy/Breaks up my feet/—And I tip—drunken." Amen.

[i] Alfred Kazin, *An American Procession: The Major American Writers from 1830-1930—the Crucial Century* (New York: Vintage Press, 1984) 164.

[ii] Thomas H. Johnson, *Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson, poems selected with an introduction by* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1964) x.

[iii] Johnson, xi.

[iv] Kazin, 165.

[v] Kazin, 166.

[vi] Kazin, 166.

[vii] Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1985) 21.

[viii] Stephen Fredman, *The Grounding of American Poetry: Charles Olson and the Emersonian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 96.

[ix] Kazin, 167.