

SURPRISED BY JOY

A meditation by Galen Guengerich
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“The world is too much with us,” laments the English poet William Wordsworth. “Late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers; little we see in nature that is ours; we have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!” Wordsworth goes on to say that not only have we lost any harmony with the natural world; we have also become indifferent to the things that matter most in life: “...For everything, we are out of tune; it moves us not.—Great God!”

As it happens, Wordsworth wrote these lines more than two centuries ago, in 1805. But they could have been penned anytime during the last several months. So many things seem out of tune.

To be sure, not everything does. Today marks the 50th anniversary of Gay Pride Day, which rightly celebrates the extraordinary strides our nation has made in recent decades and even in recent days to secure and safeguard the rights of LGBTQ people. I hope you were part of the service Audette led last week to celebrate Gay Pride Month and are able to participate in other Pride events at All Souls and beyond.

Despite the signs of progress, many other things today seem out of tune. The coronavirus pandemic, which appears to be on the ebb in New York and in some parts of Europe, seems to be flowing freely in other parts of our nation and around the world. The U.S. economy, like the economies of most nations, has been saddled with staggering levels of unemployment and rising levels of un-serviced debt. Recent episodes of callous police brutality and deadly violence against people of color have put in stark relief the white supremacy on which our nation and its institutions have been built. We are out of tune.

Wordsworth knew the sounds of a world out of tune—a world filled with peril, but also with possibility. Born in 1770 in England, he moved to France at age 19 and became a champion of the ideals of the French Revolution: liberty, equality, fraternity. He began writing poems about subjects previously considered unworthy of attention by poets, such as the world of nature and the experience of people whom society had marginalized.

This focus on experience rather than reason became the hallmark of Romanticism, a late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century movement of which Wordsworth was the leading poet. Romanticism was a reaction against the rationalism of the Enlightenment. After the Enlightenment had wrested truth from the clutches of the church, many thinkers followed Immanuel Kant’s insistence that truth could be found only through the deductions of reason and the inquiries of science.

Romantic philosophers and poets formed part of a backlash against this view that reason could solve all problems and fulfill all dreams. Instead, they emphasized feeling and immediate experience; they focused on inner passions and struggles.

Where did Wordsworth go when the world was too much with him? He went for a walk in nature. In 1799, Wordsworth took a walking tour of the Lake District in northern England with his friend Samuel Coleridge, who also became a leading Romantic poet. They came upon a former pub that was available for rent. Wordsworth fell in love with Dove Cottage, as he called it, and soon thereafter he moved into the cottage with his sister Dorothy. They were joined by Mary Hutchinson several years later, when she and William married.

Over the next seven years, William and Mary would have five children together. Both Dorothy (his sister) and Mary (his wife) contributed substantially to William's poetry — and not just by raising the children and doing the housework, which they did. Dorothy became an estimable poet in her own right, and her journals provided William with evocative descriptions of the natural world around them. Mary served as his scribe — William composed while walking out of doors — and we have since learned that she contributed some of his most memorable lines.

The decade at Dove Cottage would be the happiest years of Wordsworth's life and his most productive years as a poet. In his mind, Dove Cottage and the beautiful countryside around it were supremely important: they were a source of the kind of experiences that Wordsworth valued most. He insisted that experiences can only happen when a particular place makes them possible.

In one of his poems, Wordsworth tries to describe the elusive allure of Dove Cottage and the Lake District. He writes:

...I cannot name it, 'tis the sense
Of majesty, and beauty, and repose,
A blended holiness of earth and sky,
Something that makes this individual spot,
This small abiding-place of many [souls],
A termination, and a last retreat,
A centre, come from wheresoe'er you will,
A whole without dependence or defect,
Made for itself, and happy in itself,
Perfect contentment, Unity entire.

At its best, opening ourselves to the beauty of the natural world doesn't only enable us to escape from the dissonance of life, its brutality and its brokenness. Just because a walk is lovely doesn't mean a pandemic isn't spreading or that the markets aren't in turmoil or that justice isn't being subverted. But it does mean that not

everything is out of tune. In the blended holiness of earth and sky, we experience a center — a place of fragile wholeness, perhaps even a fleeting feeling of contentment.

Wordsworth sought such a place because he experienced firsthand life's harsh brutality. William and Dorothy's younger brother drowned in 1805. Soon thereafter, Coleridge's increasingly erratic behavior, due to his opium addiction, led William to abandon their long and treasured friendship. In 1812, two of William and Mary's children died, including three-year-old Catharine, William's favorite.

Throughout these losses — bitter, painful, wrenching — Wordsworth refused to retreat from the immediacy of his experience. Several years after Catharine died, Wordsworth wrote a poem about a moment when he wanted to tell her something. He says:

Surprised by joy, impatient as the wind,
I turned to share the transport--Oh! with whom
But Thee, deep buried in the silent tomb...
Have I been so beguiled as to be blind
To my most grievous loss?--That thought's return
Was the worst pang that sorrow ever bore,
Save one, one only, when I stood forlorn,
Knowing my heart's best treasure was no more;
That neither present time, nor years unborn
Could to my sight that heavenly face restore.

When I consider these lines in light of what has happened over the past several months, the line that utterly transfixes me is the first line, which seems shocking in the face of Wordsworth's losses. It begins: "Surprised by joy," and then continues: "impatient as the wind."

How could he write a line like that? Even as he revisits his most searing experience of loss and grief, Wordsworth found himself surprised by joy. Why? Here's my interpretation: when it came to his own experience, he was as impatient as the wind. He didn't wallow in despair or self-pity. He kept pushing, probing, searching — measuring the grief he felt against the joy he knew life harbored, measuring the want so many people suffered in isolation against the good they could experience in common, measuring the injustice he saw against the equality civilization promised. Because he was impatient as the wind, he found himself sometimes surprised by joy.

Make no mistake: the kind of impatience Wordsworth has in mind isn't the usual impatience we tend to show when everyday things happen more slowly than we want. The original meaning of the term impatient refers to a patient in the medical sense: someone who is injured or suffers in another way. Impatience in this sense is ceaseless protest in the face of human suffering.

One of Wordsworth's most impatient poems is titled "The Old Cumberland Beggar." It's about an aged vagabond who sits beside the road as everyone passes by. The beggar gathers what sustenance he can. People seem to accept the fate of the beggar as part of the nature of things. No one seems bothered by his suffering.

Then Wordsworth grows impatient. He writes:

But deem not this man useless.—Statesman! Ye
Who are so restless in your wisdom, ye
Who have a broom still ready in your hand
To rid the world of nuisances; ye proud,
Heart-swoln, while in your pride ye contemplate
Your talents, power, or wisdom, deem him not
A burthen of the earth! 'Tis Nature's law
That none, the meanest of created things,
Or form created most vile and brute,
The dullest or most noxious, should exist
Divorced from good—a spirit and pulse of good,
A life and soul, to every mode of being
Inseparably linked.

In the face of life's travesties, Wordsworth becomes impatient as the wind. Put down the broom you are using to rid your world of nuisances, he says. Treat this person with a spirit and pulse of good — as though he is inseparably linked to every mode of being, because he is. If you respond in this way, Wordsworth insists, you may be surprised by joy — not only his, but yours as well.

The point is this: in the face of life's brokenness, we will be surprised by joy not when we delude ourselves about the absence of human suffering but when we become impatient at its presence. As Helen Keller once said, "Real happiness...is not obtained through self-gratification but through fidelity to a worthy purpose."

Is the world too much with you? If so, I have three suggestions.

First, try to stay in touch with your fear, or your grief, or your loneliness. Don't sweep away your worry about a resurgence of the coronavirus, or your anxiety at our imperiled economy, or your anguish about our deficient democracy, or your outrage about our inequitable system of justice. Stay connected to what's broken in the world around you. Let yourself be moved by it.

Second, try to spend some time in nature. Maybe take a walk. It will help you stay connected to what's wonderful in the world around you.

The mid-twentieth century playwright and activist Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 play "A Raisin in the Sun" was the first by a black woman playwright to be performed on Broadway. She became a powerful influence upon the civil rights movement with her searing depictions of America's institutional violence in matters of race, class, gender

and sexuality. When she found herself, as she once put it in her diary, “feeling cold, useless, frustrated, helpless, disillusioned, angry and tired,” she discovered solace and renewal in the world of nature. She says that the “hills, the trees, sunrise and sunset — the lake the moon and the stars / summer clouds — the poets have been right in these centuries... even in its astounding imperfection this earth of ours is magnificent.”

Third, try to maintain your impatience with what’s wrong with the world. Stay connected to others who are working to repair our broken world. The best antidote to despair is engagement. Focus on the place where you can make the most difference. You don’t need to do everything, but you need to do something. Working together with others who share your vision of a world that is more truthful, more beautiful, more peaceful, and more just, you can serve as a prophet of possibility.

If you stay connected to what is broken, and what is wonderful, and what is possible, you too might find yourself surprised by joy.