

***Emily Dickinson, Satirist***

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*This is my letter to the world,  
That never wrote to me,  
The simple news that Nature told,  
With tender majesty.  
Her message is committed  
To hands I cannot see;  
For love of her, sweet countrymen,  
Judge tenderly of me!*

The simple poem with which we opened this service sets up an essential triangle, a paradigm of three relationships: The Poet and Nature, the Poet and her Readers, her Readers and Nature. Clearly the poet sees herself as a mediator between Nature and her readers. Her message conveys Nature's "simple news" to the World, her readers. But her readers have a relationship with Nature that is independent of the Poet—they have a love of Nature, a devotion to Truth and Beauty, that—she hopes—will give them the patience to listen.

This poem says nothing about the substance of Nature's news or the content of the Poet's message. It is concerned only with relationships—and in fact is made up almost entirely of nouns and verbs. We are offered a simple outline into which can be fitted the many aspects and attributes of God, Nature, and Truth that Dickinson's work explores, the many forms her message takes, the many ways the message might be received. (1:35)

One of the forms that Dickinson's message occasionally takes, one of its modes of discourse, is that of Satire. Satire, too, depends on the triangle we have just observed, that of Nature, the Poet, and the World. In "This is my Message" the poet is subject to the judgment of Nature and of the World; in Satire it is the poet who is the judge. The satirist holds the world of human thought and action to a standard and finds it wanting. She enlists her readers in this process of judgment and then, if successful, evokes the recognition that the sins they are deploring and the foolishness they are deriding are their own.

One of the milder of Dickinson's satirical poem is the one I read earlier, "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church." Like several of the poems we'll look at today, this poem targets conventional religion. At first, the speaker seems to be making a familiar excuse for skipping the Sunday service: "I find God more readily in nature than in church." She contrasts the birds and the trees to the bells and building that obstruct rather than enhance one's connection to God through Nature. The keynote of this poem is simplicity and its offhanded, everyday language and tone challenge the pretensions and artificiality of ecclesiastical diction and clerical solemnity. In nature, the sermon is never long and the connection to God is more direct. Here again is the "simple news that Nature told" in a context that compares it to the "good news" of the Gospel or at least to the convoluted way in which that news is often presented. In the beauty

and rightness of Nature, the connection to God is more direct and the distinction between Heaven and Earth begins to break down:

*God preaches, a noted Clergyman -  
And the sermon is never long,  
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last -  
I'm going, all along.*

Simplicity again appears in what may be the angriest—and most anti-clerical—of Dickinson's satirical poems, one that helps us understand why she preferred to keep the Sabbath at home. (It should be noted that the "Breadth" on which this prolix preacher dwells is probably the so-called Broad Church movement, which de-emphasized doctrine, and that the Pyrite shunned by Gold is the geologist's name for Fool's Gold.)

1266

*He preached upon "Breadth" till it argued him narrow -  
The Broad are too broad to define  
And of "Truth" until it proclaimed him a Liar -  
The Truth never flaunted a Sign -*

*Simplicity fled from his counterfeit presence  
As Gold the Pyrites (Pie-Rights) would shun -  
What confusion would cover the innocent Jesus  
To meet so enabled a Man!*

Jesus stands here as a paragon of simplicity and humility and the Gospel is again seen as "the simple news" that eludes the over-educated preacher. His appearance at the end of the poem throws the preaching style of its subject into even greater relief and emphasizes the gulf between the two.

Jesus similarly appears as a touchstone at the end of an earlier poem, "Wait till the Majesty of Death." Here the target is the class system and the social pride of those who look down upon others. Dickinson challenges those who judge a man by his social and economic position. Here again simplicity trumps pretension and here again it is Christ who sets the standard:

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*Wait till the Majesty of Death  
Invests so mean a brow!  
Almost a powdered Footman  
Might dare to touch it now!*

*Wait till in Everlasting Robes  
That Democrat is dressed -  
Then prate about "Preferment" -  
And "Station" - and the rest!*

*Around this quiet Courtier  
Obsequious Angels wait!  
Full royal is his Retinue!  
Full purple is his state!*

*A Lord, might dare to lift the Hat  
To such a Modest Clay -  
Since that My Lord - "the Lord of Lords"  
Receives unblushingly!*

We may, as we move through Dickinson's satirical poems, ask what light they shed on the question: "What IS the Simple News that Nature told?" Is it the presence of God in Nature? Is it the simplicity of the Gospel, the "tender majesty" of God's Grace? Is it the equality of all humanity in the face of Death? Is it Death itself?

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*There's been a Death in the Opposite House  
As lately as Today -  
I know it by the numb look  
Such Houses have - alway -*

*The Neighbors rustle in and out,  
The Doctor - drives away -  
A Window opens like a Pod -  
Abrupt - mechanically -*

*Somebody flings a Mattress out -  
The children hurry by -  
They wonder if it died - on that -  
I used to - when a Boy -*

*The Minister - goes stiffly in  
As if the House were His -  
And He owned all the Mourners - now -  
And little Boys - besides.*

*And then the Milliner - and the Man  
Of the Appalling Trade -  
To take the measure of the House -  
There'll be that Dark Parade -*

*Of Tassels and of Coaches soon -  
It's easy as a sign -  
The Intuition of the News  
In just a Country Town -*

Here again we have the News. Read by itself, this poem appears to be pure social satire. The bustle in a house the morning after death provides the clues that tell the townspeople that a death has occurred. The news that ripples about the town is the fact that so-and-so has died, has passed away, is no longer with us.

One reads the poem many times – just as one learns, in life’s course, of many individual deaths – before one understands what the news really is.

*The Intuition of the News*  
*In just a Country Town -*

Why “just” a country town? Why should the poet emphasize the remoteness and smallness of the place in which this news is intuited, if not to contrast that smallness with the largeness of the news? The news is not that one person has died, but that all must die. All these busy people, who think they know the news and whose social roles and economic opportunity are enhanced rather than diminished by another death, have missed the real news. In fact, all their activity—the tassels and the coaches, the milliner’s product, the pomp and circumstance of funeral and mourning, even the morbid curiosity of the children—serve only to facilitate their denial, their missing of the simple news that nature told, the news of mortality.

For all this poem’s ultimate seriousness of purpose, we can’t help delighting in the precise detail of its observation and description. Dickinson had the satirist’s eye for detail and taste for irony. She sees clearly what is going on around her and she delights in its absurdities.

A short satirical poem, arising no doubt from her observation of neighbors on their way to view a traveling zoo or circus on Amherst Common, attempts to justify this jaundiced eye:

1270

*The Show is not the Show*  
*But they that go -*  
*Menagerie to me*  
*My Neighbor be -*  
*Fair Play -*  
*Both went to see -*

If the neighbors can marvel at the strangeness of the animals, why should she not marvel at the strangeness of the neighbors?

This poem does not provide satirical detail, but several others do, and—interestingly—the ones that offer the most amusing observation are those most concerned with death.

Here’s one that again views death as the great equalizer, but focuses not on the afterlife but on “*that Dark Parade - / Of Tassels and of Coaches*”. Its opening words, “One dignity delays” can be taken to mean “One dignity awaits” and the “mitred afternoon” to denote a single afternoon that is elevated above the rest as a mitred bishop is elevated among the clergy.

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*One dignity delays for all -*  
*One mitred Afternoon -*  
*None can avoid this purple -*  
*None evade this Crown!*

*Coach, it insures, and footmen –  
Chamber, and state, and throng -  
Bells, also, in the village  
As we ride grand along!*

*What dignified Attendants!  
What service when we pause!  
How loyally at parting  
Their hundred hats they raise!  
How pomp surpassing ermine  
When simple You, and I,  
Present our meek escutcheon  
And claim the rank to die!*

Everyone will be King or Queen for a Day, but the real meaning of that position calls into question all human ambition for rank and station. This poem, and the poem I read earlier about the death of the poor man, challenge the value of “being somebody” a condition of no small importance in “just a country town.” A familiar comic poem of Dickinson’s is deepened a bit by our experience of these other poems. This is a poem which may very well have been provoked by someone’s offhand dismissal of a person of low rank: “he’s nobody”.

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*I'm Nobody! Who are you?  
Are you—Nobody—too?  
Then there's a pair of us!  
Don't tell! they'd advertise—you know!*

*How dreary—to be—Somebody!  
How public—like a Frog -  
To tell one's name—the livelong June -  
To an admiring Bog!*

An Amherst native, after hearing this poem, informed me that the land adjacent to West Cemetery, the land on which we now have our high school, had once been a bog. Proclaiming one’s name to a bog may have a connection with having it displayed on a tombstone.

This prominent inscription, as well as the prospect of being on public view at one’s funeral, may have inspired another expression of distaste for public observation:

1726

*The right to perish might be thought  
An undisputed right -  
Attempt it, and the Universe  
Upon the opposite  
Will concentrate its officers -  
You cannot even die*

*But nature and mankind must pause  
To pay you scrutiny.*

“Nature” here may refer to worms or to the general process of decay or it may allude to a larger, more benign vision of Nature, a nature of tender majesty which offers immortality.

Dickinson’s personal aversion to scrutiny is, of course, well known, though sometimes exaggerated. It surfaces in many places, even in her prodigious tribute to her art, “I dwell in Possibility.” Possibility, which we can take to mean poetry or the poetic mind, is a house of “many windows” and “superior doors”; it is well equipped with both the means of observing the world and the means of shutting the world out. Its rooms are, like the spaces within and behind the boughs of a cedar, “impregnable to eye.” Poetry sees the world readily and clearly; it is not so easily seen and understood.

Now that we’re in the cemetery, I’m afraid we’re going to stay there. I have two more poems to share, both of which find in the graveyard a juxtaposition of life and death that sheds light on both. More precisely, the juxtaposition is that of Nature’s message and the World, of the simple news of mortality and the frantic activity of human history.

In the first of these, the poet treats a tombstone as though it were a house and the graveyard as though it were a town. In the process, she offers a witty parody of the nineteenth-century local boosterism to which her father devoted so much time and effort:

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*Who occupies this House?  
A Stranger I must judge  
Since No one know His Circumstance -  
'Tis well the name and age*

*Are writ upon the Door  
Or I should fear to pause  
Where not so much as Honest Dog  
Approach encourages.*

*It seems a curious Town -  
Some Houses very old,  
Some - newly raised this Afternoon,  
Were I compelled to build*

*It should not be among  
Inhabitants so still  
But where the Birds assemble  
And Boys were possible.*

*Before Myself was born  
'Twas settled, so they say,  
A Territory for the Ghosts -  
And Squirrels, formerly.*

*Until a Pioneer, as  
Settlers often do  
Liking the quiet of the Place  
Attracted more unto -*

*And from a Settlement  
A Capital has grown  
Distinguished for the gravity  
Of every Citizen.*

*The Owner of this House  
A Stranger He must be -  
Eternity's Acquaintances  
Are mostly so - to me.*

I want to close with what I consider Dickinson's most profound work of satire. Familiar to all of you, it is devoid of laughs but rife with irony. It summarizes all of human history – in fact all of external nature, including the stars and the planets, in three exquisite lines and places them beyond sight and beyond hearing. The open gambrels of the sky are replaced by a confining, protective roof of stone.

Nature and the world have passed away and all that remains is the hopeful soul of the poet.

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*Safe in their Alabaster Chambers –  
Untouched by Morning –  
And untouched by noon –  
Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection,  
Rafters of Satin and Roof of Stone –*

*Grand go the Years,  
In the Crescent above them –  
Worlds scoop their Arcs -  
And Firmaments – row –  
Diadems – drop –  
And Doges – surrender –  
Soundless as Dots,  
On a Disc of Snow.*