

I Fit for Them: The Sober Labor of Emily Dickinson
A Meditation by Harrison Gregg
Emily Dickinson's World Weekend
At the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst
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The text for this meditation is one of Emily Dickinson's most difficult poems. It's in your insert. Let me read it again.

I fit for them - I seek the Dark
Till I am thorough fit.
The labor is a sober one
With this austerer sweet -
That abstinence of mine produce
A purer food for them, if I succeed,
If not I had
The transport of the Aim –
(Fr 1129)

This is one of those poems that demonstrates what it means to dwell in Possibility. The poem doesn't tell us what is meant by "them." We have to figure that out for ourselves. Nor are we told what it means to be "fit", what "food" is being produced or exactly what "labor" the speaker is engaged in. A prose interpretation seems virtually impossible.

And yet the seriousness of this poem is unmistakable. The labor and the abstinence are clearly very important to the poet, more important, it seems, than the "success" to which they may or may not lead.

Some of Dickinson's most intriguing poems are both elusive and allusive. We can never be sure we know exactly what is meant, but we know that meaning is present and that the experience of reading the poem has been a meaningful one for us.

When we are willing to accept this, we have moved in with Emily Dickinson. We are living in a house with numerous windows and superior doors and a roof of sky. We are no longer residing in the house of prose.

One approach to poems like this is to look for other Dickinson poems that use the same words and phrases. A concordance can be very helpful here. The poems do seem to comment on one another. Themes and images echo from one to another and a cumulative meaning begins to emerge.

I have been reading this poem in the light of the other poems that have been read or sung in this service—and of other poems that seem to be related—and I am pretty confident that I know what this poem is about.

I believe that this poem is an expression of Dickinson's dedication to her art, a dedication that is not just serious but courageous and even sacrificial. The word "them" refers both to her poems and to her readers and the "purer food" is the distillation of experience and meaning that the greatest of her poems embody.

I fit for Them – I seek the Dark

Till I am thorough fit.

Behind these mysterious words lie many poems that refer metaphorically to light and darkness, most notably the oppressive “certain shaft of light” and the darkness, both physical and spiritual, to which we must “fit our vision”.

In both of those poems—which have already been read—darkness seems to represent mortality or fear of death. “We fit our vision” describes acceptance and resignation—but Not passivity. Despite our knowledge of death and the confusion that knowledge can bring, we continue to move, to live our lives and seek our goals.

The Bravest - grope a little -
And sometimes hit a Tree
Directly in the Forehead -
But as they learn to see -

Either the Darkness alters -
Or something in the sight
Adjusts itself to Midnight -
And Life steps almost straight

The speaker’s stance in “A Certain Slant of Light” is more passive. More on this poem later, but for the moment let’s just note that in both these poems darkness is imposed upon us. It is either a necessary evil, inconveniencing but not thwarting the stalwart striver, or an “imperial affliction” chilling, immobilizing and inevitable. In “We grow accustomed” and “A Certain Slant” we do not seek the darkness; the darkness seeks us.

Darkness in “I seek the dark” is actively pursued by the speaker. And it seems to represent more than mortality. Here again we must look to other poems for a metaphorical darkness that means more than just impenetrability.

Here’s a poem which puns on a vision of “forked” lightning to suggest that darkness can hold something more:

The Lightning is a yellow Fork
From Tables in the Sky
By inadvertent fingers dropt
The awful Cutlery

Of mansions never quite disclosed
And never quite concealed
The apparatus of the Dark
To ignorance revealed.
(Fr. 1140)

This is the Dark the Poet must seek—darkness that is confusing and intimidating but pregnant with sudden flashes of insight. The insight itself can be more dangerous than darkness and the knowledge it brings is neither permanent nor complete. But it gives us a glimpse of the divine.

Emily Dickinson's fabled preoccupation with the profound mysteries and dark experiences of life—death and separation, pain and bereavement, fear and depression—is a serious mission. It is made all the more noble—and perhaps all the more audacious—by her recognition that nature is reluctant to reveal her truths:

The reticent volcano keeps
His never slumbering plan;
Confided are his projects pink
To no precarious man.

If nature will not tell the tale
Jehovah told to her
Can human nature not proceed
Without a listener?

Admonished by her buckled lips
Let every prater be -
The only secret neighbors keep
Is Immortality. (Fr. 1776)

Essential to Nature's majesty are her inscrutability and her silence. Nature knows, but she won't tell. So is it foolish on the part of the poet to attempt first to understand reality and then to express it?

If nature will not tell the tale
Jehovah told to her
Can human nature not proceed
Without a listener?

Another important poem, "This is my letter to the World"—the one we sang this morning—addresses these questions and expresses more directly Emily Dickinson's belief in her own mission.

If any human would seem to be proceeding without a listener it would be Emily Dickinson. Publishing almost nothing, she labored soberly to bring forth an astonishing body of work, most of which she had no assurance would ever be read by anyone and the rest shared with only her most intimate friends.

And yet she seemed to believe that posterity would see her poems. And she expressed this assurance in a poem that also asserted her conviction that she had penetrated, at least to some degree, the darkness of nature's secrets:

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.

How does Dickinson's poetry deliver this message?

Her best verse resembles that "certain slant of light" on winter afternoons. At its most incisive its truth-telling is like Fran Lansman's spring—it "Can Really Hang You Up The Most!"

But before it depresses you, it possesses you:

When it comes, the landscape listens –
Shadows hold their breath –

The labor of the poet—the labor of the artist—is the creation of experience. Not just making it happen, but shaping it, controlling it. The power of art is awesome: it possesses you, directs your sensations, manipulates your emotions, thwarts your expectations, challenges your perceptions. It takes charge of you, overwhelms you, wounds you—but at the same time it empowers you, enlightens you, intensifies your awareness, connects you with the Divine:

There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons -
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes -

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us -
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are -

None may teach it - Any -
'Tis the Seal Despair -
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air -

When it comes, the Landscape listens -
Shadows - hold their breath -
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death -

Let's fit our vision to that of Emily Dickinson, as she fit hers to Nature's news. We'll have a richer more satisfying experience of her poems and a more profound access to their meanings.

If we succeed.
If not, we had the transport of the aim.

Harrison Gregg
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