

WALLACE STEVENS AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS
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Wallace Stevens, it turns out, is perhaps our third greatest poet. It depends on whom you ask but I think most critics would acknowledge he is within our top five poets:

Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, then Frost or Stevens as you prefer (who were contemporaries but took different paths of the Romantic spirit), then Hart Crane.

Others will protest that Eliot or Williams or Moore or Olson should be in that pantheon but the point is Stevens was great. The fact that his stature is not generally appreciated is a sign of poetry's lessening impact on society.

Born in 1879, Stevens attended the Sunday School of First Presbyterian Church of Reading, PA where his mother was a member; and then attended, in high school, an Episcopal boys' school there where he discovered his gift for writing and speaking and gained admission to Harvard.

It is curious that out of conservative, staid Pennsylvania Dutch country – one of our most imaginative, lyrical, and important Romantic poets would emerge. We might have guessed New York City or New England or California but Reading, PA? Stevens died at the age of 76, his muse still going strong well into late age.

He was one of those rare major artists who had a secular job out side of the arts. Like the insurance executive/composer Charles Ives or the physician/poet William Carlos Williams, both his contemporaries, Stevens established a career as vice president and counsel for the Hartford Insurance Company. Some find a way to keep their job *and* practice their art.

There are many other interesting facts about Stevens some of which I can't resist: like the time in 1936 when he provoked a drunken fight with Ernest Hemingway in Key West.

Or his dislike of small talk, congratulating one of the junior executives at The Hartford whom Stevens regularly bumped into in the executive wash room, for keeping his greeting to a simple 'hello' and not babbling on about sports or the weather. Or his on and off again friendship with William Carlos Williams, his deep admiration for Marianne Moore, his dislike of T.S. Eliot and arms length relationship with Robert Frost.

Not to mention his extraordinary critical acclaim resulting in a Pulitzer Prize, two National Book Awards, The Bollingen Prize, honorary doctorates from Bard and Yale and the Poetry Society of America's Gold Medal.

The question of the pursuit of happiness is an interesting one with Stevens because he was a poet who, true to his WASP roots, was highly repressed, and used poetry as an outlet for his angst.

I imagine him as a strong introvert, occasionally moody and probably constantly brooding about his art and his life. After the success of his first poems published in 1925 Stevens fell into depression fearing his poetic gift had left him.

During this crisis which did not resolve itself for nine years he wrote little but came to a new depth of self-awareness and poetic ability.

There are many great long and short Stevens' poems but I chose "Credences of Summer" today because it is a poem about happiness which is the theme of this sermon series.

And though Stevens was considered a poet of winter because he had some dark things to say, he nevertheless wrote some gorgeous poetry about summer. Some critics claim that "Credences" is a dark poem. I agree with those who see it as a hopeful statement.

So what are the 'credences' of summer? They are insights, moments – we could even say with Wordsworth "spots of time" – when the poet, or you or I, are given insight into the meaning of human existence and nature of reality. These insights are a state of awareness accompanied by emotional/ spiritual contentment or as he summarizes in the last line simply "happiness."

Such moments Stevens claims have a grounding or centering affect upon us. And here is another key word and concept – the "center."

The very title of this poem says "here is an author who clearly believes in "centers." And while much modern thought and postmodern life has been about the fragmentation of life and thinking in William Butler Yeats' terms that "the center does not hold," Stevens advocates coherence, integrity and final unity.

While he can be exceedingly abstract, Stevens grounds his concepts in earthy images and language. There is no need to dissect summer's anatomy, he says, or use metaphor to describe it. Summer is the pinnacle of human existence. Summer is when things reach such a peak or 'apogee' as he says that we see life unabridged, without need for explanation: fertility and ripeness, he says, before they begin the descent into decay.

As much as life is obscure or ambiguous or illusive Stevens' belief is that we also have encounters with life's center that come as gifts. That such centers exist is a proposition of faith – a credence. Life is, for Stevens, a spiritual quest shaped by our credences.

"Let's see the very thing and nothing else./Let's see it with the hottest fire of sight./Burn every thing not part of it to ash. Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky/Without evasion by a single metaphor./And say this, this is the centre that I seek."

Stevens says the poet's task is to "stitch" these experiences together: stitch from which the word "poet" itself comes in its original Greek form.

What does it mean to fully understand, to see "the very thing"? Stevens is referring here to a fullness of realization through the reading and writing of poetry but the subject matter of this poetry is none other than our human existence.

It means, in an almost Zen-like way, to see a rock, a flower, a meadow or a person or relationship not only as itself but in connection with and as part of the larger whole of which it and the one perceiving it are parts.

Summer drips with such realization. Perhaps we are more physically open than in other seasons, our senses less pre-occupied with staying warm. Just this past week, I found myself marveling watching our young Labrador Retriever play with two other labs at Lake Chautauqua—their sheer joy bounding through the grass and into the water. Or the farmer's market on Bidwell Pkwy—a weekly festival of people and colors and dogs

and tables laden with fruit of the earth. The farmers' faces deeply etched by the sun, their wives and daughters at the tables smiling kindly. These were ordinary scenes and moments conveying the larger goodness and interdependence of life.

But achieving happiness just by realizing that we and what we perceive are part of a larger whole is only part of the message today. The second and more subtle part is what he calls ignorance or "right ignorance of change still possible" as opposed to false ignorance.

What happens, he says, is that eventually this blissful, gift of insight that we are part of a life's beautiful fabric begins to ebb of its significance and effect. Life goes on, our circumstances change—a dream ends, a diagnosis is made, a loved one dies—and what we thought was a center somehow becomes strangely marginal, and we find ourselves searching all over again.

"The gardener's cat is dead, the gardener gone/And last year's garden grows salacious weeds./A complex of emotions falls apart." And here is the dark side of Stevens which is a trademark of all Romantic poets who accept the fact and necessity of the rain along with the glory of sunshine.

The fruit ripens so to speak and unless we enjoy it in the moment, it sits, decays and loses its appeal. Stevens and all the Romantic modernists and their predecessors extolled and embraced the organic nature of life.

And whereas 'false ignorance' concludes when the fruit of past insight begins to rot that our first insight that life has a center was an illusion and the perceiver questions herself; 'right ignorance' concludes that we cannot know or see all that is true all at once because life is, as Heraclitus said, a river of constant flux and change. It is not the perceiver who is mistaken but the inherent change that sometimes antiquates our perceptions.

But if we trust our quest through this world we will be given other insights of the center from whatever new perspectives life provides.

Implicit in Wallace Stevens poetry is an important tenant of modern thought: genuinely knowing our worlds involves us not just in discovering but creating them as well.

And for this reason the poetry of Wallace Stevens and of William Wordsworth last week and of any Romantic poet is not *about* the event but *is* the event itself. To read Stevens is to enter into his reality, the reality he perceives and makes.

His famous poem "An Ordinary Evening In New Haven" takes this logic to its extreme and creates one new reality after another in an ordinary town on an ordinary evening.

Which brings us, you might have guessed if you were here last week, to the threshold of the imagination. It is the imagination that makes and creates new realities not out of thin air but as the subject/object dance of the poet and "the thing itself" is carried out.

Here is Milton in 20th century dress: the material world into which Adam and Eve were banished is a world not to despair over but to delight in and celebrate. A world that

enriches and is enriched by the imagination. This awakening to creation's center causes our knowledge to collapse into being, and what was initially revelation to result in the reconciliation of life's fragments.

What so often seems like a broken and fragmented world and human experience is, through the eyes and words of the poet a beautiful whole, "complete in a completed scene" as he says at the close of canto X.

Yesterday walking the dog down Elmwood in early morning, I saw coming the opposite way a young mother pushing a baby carriage and her young son walking beside her.

They were walking purposefully going somewhere and as I looked at them I noticed each of them had longish red hair; the mother, the son, the toddler in the stroller; and the morning breeze lifted their red locks which suddenly seemed like earthly halos as they walked briskly past.

It was an almost holy encounter—a mother full of responsibility, her older child helping with his hand on the stroller, the infant blissfully riding along. The moment had no great significance other than its natural integrity and beauty; but it might have been, as I think about it, one of Stevens' encounters with the center.

This is the Gospel according to Wallace Stevens; *Good news*, he says in canto VI, not "a hermit's truth nor symbol in hermitage./It is the visible rock, the audible, the brilliant mercy of a sure repose./Of this present ground...things certain sustaining us in certainty."

Such news he says in canto VII is not to be kept secret but becomes "a trumpet song of morning that blows in the clouds and through the sky./It is the visible announced, the more than visible, the more than sharp, illustrious scene."

And in a reference to *Paradise Lost* and Christ's expulsion of Satanic legions from heaven (the realm of spirit) Stevens says this secular gospel of poetry that substitutes for "stratagems of the spirit," (read religious dogma) celebrates the transformation of God's spirit and the human spirit and even the spirit of evil from invisible to visible in the material world.

Which is perhaps a good place to braid Stevens' pursuit of happiness with that of John's Gospel today in the first chapter.

Those first familiar lines of John remind us of the materiality of this world that is at once beautiful but can also be so limited and disappointing.

It was into this limited, tangible, material world, the very form of a human body, that the Light of God and energy of creation entered. John calls this energy "The Word" because the Hebrew understanding in Genesis is that when God spoke but a word: "light," "fish," "man," "stars" – so pure was God's utterance and power that those things came instantly into being. This Light and Word enters the world, John says, in the person of Jesus.

Last week Wordsworth said you and I are co-creators with God. No belief could be more central to Stevens' "Credences of Summer" than this: as we exercise our trust

and imagination from whatever perspective or circumstance we have in life – we create the space, indeed the very worlds we inhabit.

Not out of thin air but as we are given glimpses into this abiding truth: we are each part of something much bigger than ourselves and as we perceive and define it the world changes, we change, new beginnings and possibilities emerge.

Or, as Stevens says at the close of his poem, “the characters speak because they want/To speak, the fat, the roseate characters,/Free, for a moment, from malice and sudden cry,/Complete in a completed scene, speaking/Their parts as in a youthful happiness.” Amen.