

SURPRISED BY JOY

A sermon preached 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!” He goes on to say that not only have we lost all harmony with the natural world; we have also become hardened 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 nearly two centuries ago, in 1805. But they could have been penned any day last week. Everything seems out of tune. The U.S. economy, like the economies of most advanced nations, has once again entered the danger zone. The increasingly acute sovereign debt crisis in Europe threatens to tear apart the Euro zone. Set against the backdrop of seismic shifts in the Arab world—some doubtless for better, some perhaps for worse—the showdown at the United Nations over Palestinian statehood seems a high-stakes gambit indeed.

Here at home, the execution of Troy Davis calls into question our commitment to being a republic where, as our Pledge of Allegiance puts it, we ensure liberty and justice for all. And the principal conversation among those who wish to be our next president is whether turning back the clock 80 years is sufficient or whether reversion to an earlier period of civilization would be better. We are out of tune.

With what are we out of tune, you may ask? Many of our experiences are out of tune with our ideals. The ideal of democracy gives the power to govern not to those who have been ordained by God, nor to those who have inherited a title, nor to those who have amassed a fortune, but to each and every citizen. But when the majority of citizens feels politically impotent and economically fearful, democracy becomes another name for the political manipulation of the many to serve the interests of the few. We are out of tune.

The ideal of capitalism gives people the right to own the fruit of their own labor and thereby to choose their own way of life. But as economic systems become ever more complex and financial disparities ever more magnified, capitalism becomes another name for the economic deprivation of the many for the benefit of the few. We are out of tune.

The ideal of justice is that a neutral standard applies to the actions of everyone, regardless of social standing, or economic circumstances, or gender, or sexual orientation, or religion, or race. The law is that neutral standard—at least it’s supposed to be. But sometimes it’s not. Troy Davis is dead because he was not wealthy and white, like Dominique Strauss-Kahn. I’m not saying that Davis was innocent or that DSK was guilty. But enough evidence suggests that DSK might have committed a crime and that Troy Davis might not have that the disparity in outcome looks to me like a travesty of justice. We are out of tune.

William 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 the sublimely beautiful Lake District in northern England. Holly and I were fortunate enough to be able to do the same for several days earlier this week, after helping Zoe move into her dorm at the University of St. Andrews. With our goodbyes still echoing, I was feeling bereft, not to mention battered by the headlines. The Lake District, with its blend of pastoral beauty and daunting ruggedness, was a perfect place to wrestle with a world out of tune.

For his part, Wordsworth took a walking tour of the Lake District in 1799 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. And 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 exquisitely beautiful countryside around it were supremely important: they were first and foremost 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. Indeed, this particular place—All Souls—makes certain experiences possible that are hard to find elsewhere.

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 it best, the experience of the Lake District—or any place of beauty and repose—isn't only an escape from the dissonance of the world, its brutality and its brokenness. In fact, Holly and I took our feelings of loss and the turmoil of the morning's headlines with us alongside every ancient stone wall, through every meadow strewn with sheep, and atop every crag and crest. Just because the walk is lovely doesn't mean your daughter hasn't left home or that the markets aren't in turmoil. But it does mean that not everything is out of tune. In the blended holiness of earth and sky, we experienced a center—a place of fragile wholeness, perhaps even a fleeting feeling of happiness.

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—William refused to retreat from the immediacy of his experience. Several years after Catharine died, William 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.

I read this poem on Monday while visiting Dove Cottage. I was feeling a little forlorn myself, though obviously with far less cause than Wordsworth. My daughter had merely left home; his was dead and buried. The line in the poem that utterly transfixed me was actually the first line, which seems shocking in the face of his loss. 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 intolerance people demonstrate when the driver ahead isn't already moving as the light turns green or the irritation they show when the entrée course hasn't shown up, and it's 45 minutes till curtain time. 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-sworn, 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, 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 says in today's Common Meditation for All Souls, "Real happiness...is not obtained through self-gratification but through fidelity to a worthy purpose." ([Sign up here](#) to receive the daily Common Meditation by email.)

Is the world too much with you? Don't sweep away your fear, or your grief, or your loneliness. Don't sweep away your worry about our stalled economy, or your anguish about our stunted democracy, or your outrage about our besieged system of justice. Take full measure of your own experiences, and use them to get in tune with the brokenness of the world around you. Let yourself be moved by what is broken.

Then get impatient. Get in tune with others in this particular place. Find a way to repair our broken world. Then you too might just find yourself surprised by joy.