

At Night His Song ***(The Re-enchantment of Vision)***

*Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
By day the LORD commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.
(Psalm 42:5a, 8)*

*The eagle never lost so much time
as when he submitted to learn of the crow.
(William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 1790)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, June 17, 2018
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I want this morning to tell you a story of two letters – two letters I received within the space of a single week, 33 years ago, in February 1985. The previous year I had completed my M. Div. at Mid-America Seminary in Memphis and found myself settled into my first year of that seminary’s Doctor of Theology program. Something there was, though, stirring within. Call it wanderlust, a growing desire to turn my interest away from theology and fully into the field Semitic languages – Hebrew and its cognates in the ancient near eastern world.

After careful research I applied to a school ranking in nation’s top five for their Ancient Near Eastern Studies program, the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. It was an exciting moment I recall even now, opening the letter of acceptance to study with David Noel Freedman, one of the world’s premier Hebrew scholars, who at that moment was leading the Anchor Bible Dictionary project as General Editor. Our course was set, and Sherry and I excitedly began making plans for a mid-summer move to Ann Arbor, in plenty of time for the fall semester.

A few days after that acceptance letter a different trip to the mailbox discovered a second letter from Ann Arbor. “*Perhaps they forgot to tell me how very much they look forward to my arrival,*” I might have thought as I ripped eagerly into the envelope. No, it wasn’t that. In fact, this second letter was utterly dispiriting. The gist of it: “*Mr. Johnson, we congratulate you upon acceptance to our ANE studies program. However, we are required to tell you that, if you choose to pursue advanced degrees in this liberal arts field, be aware you are taking an academic route with very much less potential for financial reward than other fields of study offered by this university, and for which you may be qualified.*” They were saying, “*Do this with our blessing, but know that the world is changing – the skills you have chosen to apply yourself to learn may not, you will find upon your completion, be very marketable.*”

How dare they tell me what I already knew, then support it with charts and graphs and lines, “*O, my!*” blocking the spiraling yellow brick route to the Emerald City of my academic pursuits! With that second letter my vision, which had lifted my spirits to soar like an eagle, now . . . well. The letter sounded clearly a warning, as if from a crow, against flying too enthusiastically high. “*Stay down here with me,*” saith the crow, “*closer to reality, and more accessible to the things one really requires in life.*”

The letter bade me listen, so I did, wondering whether, with two elementary age children should I listen to MY eagle and move to Ann Arbor, risking financial doom for my family? Or should I listen to MY crow, “*put away childish things and get serious about earning a crust?*” Doused were the fires of my academic passion, drenched and dripping my dreams as the letter placed me squarely under the spell of the rational.

Well, there are worse places to be, I suppose, than in the realm of the rational. In fact, as I have said, they were not wrong, however untimely as their accurate and irrefutable tracking of data. “*Know what you’re getting yourself into, young man! Do this if you will, but do this, if you must, with eyes wide open. The liberal arts? C’mon, what good will they be in the new world?*”

I’ve directed you to Psalm 42 this morning because I think the psalmist experiences a rather similar fluctuation of spirit, a high of refreshing followed by a low of dismay. At first refreshed by the flowing streams, the psalmist then crashes, wondering “*Why are you cast down within me, O my soul, why are you disquieted within me?*”

“*Well then, Sherry, perhaps we should rethink this. Cancel that U-Haul. Maybe Ann Arbor isn’t such a good idea, after all.*” Thus the dream began to fray, unraveling at its edges during the eyes-wide-open daytime of rational reflection. Driving in the morning four times a week from Helena to Memphis for my classes, my vision of my future in the light of day looked as ungleamingly bleak as those pre-casino cotton fields of Tunica, Mississippi, what was back then a lonely, infinitely less traveled, two land road with depressing rural scenery. My classes, which only the previous week were sparked with excitement at the possibility of study with David Noel Freedman and filled with congratulations from my classmates for being accepted in such a prestigious program, were now dulled. The eagle was submitting to learn of the crow.

Joseph Campbell in that same year of 1985 sat down with Bill Moyers at George Lucas’ Skywalker Ranch in California for a series of interviews that produced 24 hours of raw footage, resulting in a series called “*The Power of Myth.*” It was in that year that Campbell’s philosophy of life was popularized, *Follow your Bliss*. Ah, there’s an eagle mentality of life if ever there was one! Refreshed by ever-flowing waters he wrote “*If you follow your bliss, you put yourself on a kind of track that has been there all the while, waiting for you, and the life that you ought to be living is the one you are living. Wherever you are — if you are following your bliss, you are enjoying that refreshment, that life within you, all the time.*”

Driving to Memphis, though, in the eyes-wide-open daytime, I was finding it hard to follow my bliss. My bliss was beginning to look more like my blisters, the promise of rough terrain ahead. On this Father’s Day I recall a Wall Street Journal cartoon which my father clipped and gave me, he an avid reader of the journal throughout his life from his days as a student in LSU to this day

at 100 years old. Like my father, I never miss the *Pepper and Salt* cartoon on the op-ed page. The frame he clipped for me was of a homeless man sitting on the sidewalk in rags and begging passersby for help. The sign the beggar was holding said, “*I followed my bliss.*” The message was clear. In financial matters, the crow is often wiser than the eagle.

For a couple of weeks I struggled with this decision. During the bright daytime the second letter held sway. Ah, but at night, *At Night His Song* would return, bringing with it a re-enchantment of the vision, a re-assessment of what is possible based on dreams. O, the blessing of *His Song at Night*, when a whisper, no more, resonates. To hear it is to feel true to oneself. And so it was for several days of decision-making -- doubting by day, believing by night.

William Blake wrote, “*The eagle never lost so much time as when he submitted to learn of the crow.*” If there is any doubt what that means, perhaps an old southern saying once emblazoned on caps and t-shirts will convey it better: “*I shot my coon dog for aimin’ too low!*” Don’t aim too low! If the daytime and its clear-sightedness have focused your sights on only that which can be clearly seen, let the nighttime sing differently of not only what is, but what might be.

Here is the statue of Thomas Edison in Ft. Myers, Florida at the Edison & Ford Winter Estates. Edison purchased the estate in 1885 and his friend Henry Ford later purchased the adjacent property. The statue features an oddity. In his left hand he grips a stainless steel ball. I find powerful the story of that steel ball, which I regard as Edison’s quest to hear *At Night His Song* with more frequency. If the song of these nighttime muses is so alluring, why hear it only once? The steel ball was his manipulation of the day and night, a trick played on nature in order to hear this song of hope again and again. *You see*, Edison wanted



to use *the* threshold state of consciousness between wakefulness and sleep to stimulate creative

insight. When confronted with a difficult problem (and how many of those second letters must Edison have received at Menlo Park, how many the “it won’t work!” moments), he settled into his office chair for a nap, drifting off to sleep while thinking *about the problem*. *Surely* we ALL know what it is to drift off to sleep thinking about a problem.

That steel ball gave him an advantage. To help him recall and record insights gained during that interval between wakefulness and sleep, he placed metal pans beside his chair. When he entered genuine sleep his hands relaxed, dropping the steel balls in the pans. He found being so rudely awakened helpful to remembering and recording insights gained during that intensely revelatory moment. Was Edison not seeking to hear what the psalmist calls, *At Night His Song*?

Edison perceived that something there is, just beyond the threshold of consciousness, waiting to reveal itself, to sing its inspiration. The eagle's Song at Night enabled him to soar, to break away from the accepted rational that formed the limits of thinking.

Charles Holland Duell, Commissioner of the United States Patent Office in 1899, has often been quoted as saying, "*Everything that can be invented has been invented.*" Sounds like the crow to me! "*Stay down here . . . this is as good as it's going to get!*"

Problem is, that quote has been successfully debunked. In fact, Duell wrote in 1902, "*In my opinion, all previous advances in the various lines of invention will appear totally insignificant when compared with those which the present century will witness. I almost wish that I might live my life over again to see the wonders which are at the threshold.*" Ah, words of the eagle. "*Fly with me!*"

Now, as inspirational the eagle/crow story may sound in the context of career choices and following one's dreams, I'll admit that it is incomplete. In fact, in every decision the Crow and the Eagle are present, presenting their arguments. Both need to be given due respect. In my own past year moving to the Village, Sherry and I have purchases a home, then a boat. Both the Crow and the Eagle were with us, and both needed.

I conclude with a simple prayer for you: "*When you need it, may your ears be opened to hear . . . At Night His Song.*"