

When I'm Quiet Enough to See

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"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, . . . "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

—LEWIS CARROLL, *THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS*

Writing this essay has pulled me into a journey of discovery. One idea has led to another, and my initial view—seeing my awareness of beauty awakening as I grow calm—has grown into a tree with many branches.

Because I much enjoy puzzling over ideas and questioning them, my view of beauty is not unlike that of Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty. In my childhood years, "beauty" was not a common word. Things that I later called "beautiful" were accepted as simply themselves. My father's wheat fields rippled with the wind, the clouds overhead had shapes that could be built into a story, the blackbirds noisily welcomed the morning. It wasn't until I left our farm for college and, later, for the city—and then returned—that I fully saw the beauty of a windswept field or a tree-ripened peach,

that I appreciated the delicate sweetness of that peach and the rich taste of the tomato picked red and ripe and warm from the vine.

One of my poems—"Carry a Stone," written in my fifties about my grandmother Anna, who died when I was seventeen—surprised me when I looked back at its ending:

*You are most
beautiful before you die.
That is the story
of my grandmother.*

Rather often it seems that I need to be absent from beauty for a while to learn to recognize it. Many of my recollections of beauty have come from re-seeing the familiar in a new way, but I also have had a few appreciations of sudden beauty—a backyard sky-show of flashing meteorites, a sudden view of open canyon in Bryce National Park after climbing a rough path and edging past a giant rock, the steady march of a gleaming turtle slowly passing my parked bicycle and heading downward to the stream. Sharp electrification from head to toe—appreciation with a gasp.

In recent years I've become more aware of my habits of perception. Since early girlhood I have been a curious problem solver—habitual first from life on a farm, where a broken latch on a barnyard gate or a leak in a cattle-watering trough were matters that needed immediate solutions with whatever materials were available; later my problem-solving skills were strengthened by study and practice with mathematics—looking for unanswered questions, refining their formulations, seeking partial and full solutions. Excited to adopt new concepts, to figure things out.

Sometimes writing also is for me a problem-solving activity. I write for a while and then, as my fingers spell out words, the words shape my thoughts toward new ideas. As I wrote the poem "Carry a Stone" about my grandmother, my words led me to see

her beauty—in her case, a beauty of patience and calm. Through hundreds of games together, she taught me to play checkers—and occasionally I would win. She taught me how to work with yeast, to handle dough, to bake bread.

Seven years ago, shortly after I became a grandmother, one of my sons was taken to the emergency room with acute pancreatitis—he was for many days near death, for fourteen months in the hospital. I sat with him; I became close to his family. I saw beauty in the movements of a skilled nurse, beauty in the rhythms of pain-free breathing, beauty in the learning patterns of a three-year-old granddaughter. When I am able to be still, I see so much that is beautiful. Perhaps “patience” and “calm” are themselves beauty—and not just for my grandmother. Perhaps beauty is everywhere and I must slow down to see it—these are notions that my writing here suggests I should consider.

When I look back—in contrast to experiences that seek and know beauty—I see that from childhood onward I’ve been a person who craved activity. My mother repeated, over and over and over, “Sit still.” In school, my teachers did not complain, BUT it seems I always sat in the back row—where my wiggle-worming did not distract others. At home, after chores, I can hear myself saying as I head outdoors, “I *need* to go out for a ride on my bike.” And there were long, long walks through the pasture fields with our sheepdog, Ace. In contrast to this, though, was the quiet ritual that our family followed during thunderstorms.

Both our barn and our house wore lightning rods on their roof peaks, and these metal spikes were wired to the earth—designed to attract lightning and ground it. My mother, however, was concerned that electric lights and appliances being used in the house during a thunderstorm might attract lightning away from the rods—and so we unplugged the TV and the iron and turned off the lights and went out of the house to the long front porch and—as if in a theater viewing a film—we watched the storm arriving

with radiance and bluster, brilliantly and noisily dancing across the fields, leaving behind a washed-clean world with a fresh scent.

Many years later, far from the farm, I impose my childhood memories on thunderstorms—I see beauty and feel excitement when they rage, I breathe deeply the freshened air afterward. As I write this, I am led to wonder how essential memory is to my sense of what is beautiful. I particularly remember scents—not only the freshened air that followed thunderstorms but also the scents of lilac and mock orange from bushes that sat in distant corners of our farmhouse yard. Even now, the slightest whiff can transport me back in time and make me smile.

A “need” for the calming effects of exercise—that time when physical activity robs my mind of its quests to explore and my thoughts settle into stillness, cleared of anxiety—has chased me always. In graduate school I took end-of-day bicycle rides; when family and a job placed more limits, I learned to squeeze a short run in here or there. Burning restless packets of energy is a key part of my life, but it is necessity rather than beauty. I lose myself in beauty at times when I am quiet enough to see it. As during a thunderstorm. Or when I have burned the energy that resists the beauty of calm.

When I began to find time to study poetry I was in my fifties; my children were grown and my after-work time—I was a math professor and divorced—was my own. And one of the frequent phrases used by Karl Patten, my first workshop teacher, was “everything connects”—a phrase I later also found as a poem title in his collection *The Impossible Reaches* (Dorcas Press, 1992). Patten’s poem speaks of driftwood, and nostalgia, and birds; it ends with the line “Every thing out there waits to be found.”

A book find that opened important doors for me—first in my role as teacher and then spilling over into my poetry and personhood—is the collection *Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (Basic Books, 1986), gathered by Mary

Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule. Its presentation of cases and “frames of mind” gave me a world in which to find my mathematics students and myself, to recognize our varied ways of learning—and to find courage to identify the ways in which new ideas come into my head, including their entry through my fingers. This information, together with Howard Gardner’s *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (Basic Books, 1983), helped me to learn flexible strategies to use with students in my classrooms and, at the same time, set the stage for self-knowing. I am a unique individual, not only an explorer but a subject to explore.

This essay has meandered—for that is what my mind does. As my thoughts amble, if I direct my fingers to write things down, then—in the back-and-forth process between fingers and mind—comes my recognition of what I have found.

Looking back through my years of poetry, I discovered that my fingers long ago had a picture of what beauty is and how to find it, how to let it happen. I found this final stanza of a poem written more than twenty-five years ago and entitled “Invite a Leprechaun” (from *Intersections*, Kadet Press, 1993).

*When leaves show their undersides
in love with the breeze,
open the door.*

Linny

DALE BELL

I unpacked my trunk of clothes. They would last me throughout the school year. My roommate, who had arrived earlier that day, claimed his side of the room and a closet. I found space in the remaining bureau, the other closet, and under my bed. Darkness arrived. With it, September snow flurries. A knock at the door. The faculty dorm-master . . . I had a phone call. Come downstairs. Three flights into the kitchen of his apartment, he showed me the phone, then left the room.

It was my mother. She told me she and my father were getting a divorce. It was not a surprise. Many times, as I witnessed my father helplessly recoiling at her drunken rages, I screamed at him, wielding my baseball bat, that he should leave. “Get out!” I would be OK, I assured him. Anything would be better than the torment of watching him quiver at her violent outbursts. She was uncontrollable. Now, it was real. She said that my dad would call me. My first day at a prep boarding school had ended. I was alone.

But I wasn’t. At summer camp in Maine over past years, I had learned that I would be cared for and nurtured. People did guide