

“Enthusiasmos”
Rev. Greg Ward
Unitarian Universalist Metro Atlanta North
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Meditation: "Vincent (Starry, Starry Night)"

Don Maclean

Starry, starry night
Paint your palette blue and grey
Look out on a summer's day
With eyes that know the darkness in my soul
Shadows on the hills
Sketch the trees and daffodils
Catch the breeze and the winter chills
In colours on the snowy linen land

Now I understand
What you tried to say to me
And how you suffered for your sanity
And how you tried to set them free
They would not listen
They did not know how
Perhaps they'll listen now
Starry, starry night
Flaming flowers that brightly blaze
Swirling clouds and violet haze
Reflect in Vincent's eyes of china blue
Colours changing hue
Morning fields of amber grain
Weathered faces lined in pain
Are soothed beneath the artists' loving hand

Now I understand
What you tried to say to me
And how you suffered for your sanity
And how you tried to set them free
They would not listen
They did not know how
Perhaps they'll listen now

For they could not love you
But still your love was true
And when no hope was left inside
On that starry, starry night
You took your life as lovers often do
But I could have told you Vincent
This world was never meant for one as beautiful as you

Sermon:

There is a kind of madness at work in the world today. The kind a lot of people seem trapped in. It's a madness hard to describe. But, that's the thing about madness – it's hard to understand. We like to think it belongs only to creative geniuses, like Van Gogh. But we all know something about it, really. At least, if we've ever had something – or believed in something – so deeply, and lost it. And then tried to know it again. Things like love. Or truth.

It's the kind of madness that might befall anyone. But, let's just say we're talking about a friend. Yeah, a friend. Not me. Or you... because we're not mad... a friend... who you come across one day as they are sitting in sort of a proverbial ditch on the side of a road. And you come across them and raise an eyebrow because – hey, they're in a ditch, I mean, c'mon – and you're wondering how they got to be in that ditch. So you ease your way down into the ditch with them and say, 'So, why are you in this ditch?' and they start going into this story that sounds really familiar.

They tell you about a time, not long ago, when they walked along really excited about their lives and all the things they were going to do in the world – when they were filled, bursting, with creative energy and ideas. And felt passionate about principles... like justice... and freedom... and had plans about what they were going to do to make all this stuff happen.

And then they stop, not sure how to explain what happened next... they were just going along feeling incredibly brilliant and proud of themselves, when they noticed a little doubt creep in – a voice that asked them, 'are you brilliant? I mean, really? I'm not so sure you are?' And it began to matter to them what other people thought... and it began to bother them when people actually said they didn't think so much of his ideas – or even him... and he developed this preoccupation and before he knew it he had walked right into this ditch.

And you shook your head thinking, 'yeah, that is familiar.' And he went on saying it, at first, made him feel a little silly – the first time. But, he picked up all his brilliant ideas and dusted them off till they began to shine again and crawled out and started off ready to share - until he fell into ditch again.

He tells you this and you nod as he explains how, now he was frustrated. But still, he got out, started off again, this time a little more wary. Cautious. Looking around, but still - he fell in again. Only this time, he swears to you,... he was pushed! You start to nod slower now. And scratch your chin. And squint your eyes. And you say, '*pushed, eh?*'

Then he begins to explain, in a somewhat defeated voice, how it sort of became routine. Getting up, climbing out, being pushed back in. Sometimes he would fall in just because he was always looking over his shoulder. Until, finally, pushed in for the last time, he decided to just stay in. Show the rest of the world. Not bother to get out. He would take his stand and make a go of it from this little ditch. "Never, no, never" he said. "Never, no, never," would he hold up his light just to have it snuffed out.

You understand. It's frustrating. Sure. "But, a ditch?" you ask.

"Well... okay..., it's a fixer-upper" he explains, "but at least I don't have to deal with 'THAT!'" and he sweeps his arm in such an emphatic gesture and contempt in his voice it's obvious what he's talking about. Until you look confused. And then he goes on to explain, "You know, 'THEM!'"

And you begin to look around. But you don't see anything. But you do finally begin to understand – how this ditch has become one big psychological, social – even religious - line drawn in the sand. The last refuge. And so you nod. And say something you think will be helpful, like, 'yeah, well, at least you're free.' "Of THAT!... and THEM!, I mean." And you begin to slowly back away. But before you take that

last step out of the ditch you are both in you think about extending a hand. Doing something you think might help to set him free. And you pause.

‘There is a kind of madness at work in the world,’ you think to yourself. And you are cautious about getting too close to it. It’s dangerous, you think. Maybe even contagious – this sort of a ‘bunker mentality.’ And you would be apt to think of it as completely crazy, and impossible to relate to. If it wasn’t so familiar. If it didn’t feel a whole lot like something you remember well. Something about the first time you fell in love... the first time your heart was broken... and how you learned to love again.

The falling in love part is, actually, for a lot of people, the harder piece to remember. It’s not that you’ve lost touch with those amazing ‘high’ feelings, that swooning rush of excitement and enthusiasm and imagination where everything is possible and risking appearing a little foolish was just what you did. Oh yeah, you remember all that.

But the problem is that a lot of those memories are carefully guarded. Kept in a locked file. With a sentry you assigned to the entrance sometime after your first broken heart. And as soon as one of those memories of falling in love starts playing that sentry comes running out of their booth blowing a whistle saying, “Hey, man, you don’t want to watch that! Remember how all that ended? All that was before. Before she forgot to come to your game. Before he forgot that you like ceramic ducks, not owls. Before she made that revealing comment in front of your friends and before he failed to say anything about that thoughtful card it took you an hour and a half to pick out at the store. That was before she started making plans without asking you and before he stopped thinking your opinion mattered. Before she became such a cow! Or he became such a pig! Or whatever farm animal’s face seemed appropriate.

It gets harder to remember those moments where you risked everything for love – when you were willing to be a fool - because in the stockroom of our memories we often store more footage of how we got burned. We tell ourselves as we file those away that they are for our own good. They are ‘protective lessons.’ But they end up being ‘prohibitive lessons.’ And not only do they make it harder to remember love in the past - what it was like when you had enthusiasm and you were able to shine so bright - it makes it hard to imagine doing it in your future.

So, there you are, on the edge of this ditch, looking down at your friend and really beginning to relate to his story. And you realize that his ditch wasn’t made from the crater of falling out of love with a person. It’s more ordinary than that. More universal. His crater was made from falling out of love with the world. The whole collective array of slights and indifference. Of betrayals and selfish acts of strangers. And all the acts of violence and destruction that are born out of fear and rage. The original lessons may have pushed your friend in the ditch, but it was the replaying of them so often that convinced him not to come out. And you also realize, after thinking about your own life, that sometimes we make our craters even deeper by the simple act of wearing down our little patch of ground pacing back and forth so much on our own mental retreats. And you realize how we often make it even deeper by inviting over all of our friends - who agree with us – so they can pace back and forth with us. And eventually we wear it so deep that we can’t see any light over the edge. And no one out there can see ours.

“Wow!” you think to yourself, still on the edge of this bunker. “It could be so different.” You can tell from walking around and hearing stories that there is a lot of light out there. Brilliance. Creativity. Energy. Love. But it’s just not being shared. Not being allowed to shine.

And you think, “This is madness.” All of this light! What an amazing thing it could be if it could come together. But so much of it is hunkered down. Walled up. Protected. So much of it has been saying “Never, no, never” for so long it isn’t sure how to say “yes, again. Yes, I will try again.”

And you look at your friend in the bunker and you want to feel sorry for him. Or pity him. But you can't. Because you realize that his story is too much like your own. After all, you still haven't, in that moment, risked being bitten. Risked reaching out your own hand to help. Not yet, anyway.

This morning I want to talk about a kind of madness at work in the world today. Not the kind that would be easy to spot – the kind revealing bombs blowing up subways or suicide vigilantes that target little children. Not that kind of madness - that creates obvious enmity or division in the world. Not even the more subtle enmity and division in our immediate lives born of arguments or misunderstandings. I want to talk about the kind of madness that would have us get up, dust ourselves off, return a shine to our heart – even after it has been burned – and go out and love again. And not just a person – but every person like them that we can imagine – a world filled with people just like that. That kind of madness.

What is it that invokes that kind of madness?

The word 'gumption' comes to mind. It's a kind of word that describes a raw, seat of the pants, ornery stubbornness that won't be defeated. It's a Scottish word that feels rugged and pioneer-ish.

But we are not pioneers – first timers. And for that reason, I think I like the Greek translation better. Their word is 'entusiasmos.' Its meaning is similar to what we said in our chalice lighting this morning: "to rise knowing everything is animated, everything speaks of passion and invites us to cherish it." It comes from the root – en theos – which means 'the passion of gods dwelling within.' It speaks of the undeniable, unquenchable drive to create. To participate. To be part of. To reach out and love life.

It is spirit. Breath. What animates us. It is what allows us to illuminate all that is good in our human-ness. It is what makes us shine. And it is the only thing that allows us to pick ourselves up and rise up out of a ditch. And to lift off that wet blanket that continues to say, "Never, no, never."

The madness at work in our world today – the madness that chants the mantra, "Never, no, never" is not something new. It has existed since time began. It has squandered the lives of and diminished the spirits of some of the great human beings of the world. We all know some. But we also know those who have refused to be subdued. This morning I want to hold up one extraordinary example of entusiasmos.

Most of you know Vincent Van Gogh, that he was born in Holland in 1853. Most of you know he had a troubled life, prone to mood swings and erratic behavior. You might have heard how he never quite fit into the world. How few people understood his gifts. Accepted him. Appreciated him. How the world seemingly kept pushing him into a ditch.

But I wonder if you know how he spent a lifetime of climbing out and offering again all he had even after rejection. When his initial venture into art failed, he tried to work in galleries. When that proved unsuccessful he tried to deal in art supplies.

By his late teens he declared an interest in following his father into parish ministry. His parents doubted his temperament, which was short, and his attention span, which was shorter, but put up the money for his education. Vincent fell out of schooling very close to where he got in electing, instead, to pastor a small group of miners in a very poor English village. His ministry – as with most of his endeavors - was described as 'passionate,' and/or 'intense.' But here is where his sense of deep connection with people really came out. He held a deep compassion for the harsh and tragic lives of the miners. But his enthusiasm

got him dismissed by his ecclesiastical superiors when he began selling the possessions of the church to buy food for the families in his parish.

He struggled forever after with God and his own desire to ‘help people out of the ditch.’ Later in life, in one of his many letters to his brother Theo, he wrote:

Sometimes I know so well what I want. I can very well do without God both in my life and in my painting, but I cannot, ill as I am, do without something which is greater than I, which is my life - the power to create.

And if, defrauded of the power to create physically, a man tries to create thoughts in place of children, something which insures that he is still very much part of humanity.

(That is why), in a picture, I want to say something as comforting as music is comforting. I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize, and which we seek to confer by the actual radiance and vibration of our colorings.

Without children, without a family, it was painting that Vincent eventually turned toward to express his love for the world – even though he showed little initial talent. It wasn’t his skill that made him so compelling as a painter – it was his gumption. His enthusiasm. The very real sense that everything he painted attempted to show a vibrancy, a dignity or a holiness often overlooked. And one was left to wonder, especially in retrospect of his painting career, whether it was in the subject, or in the artist that that vibrancy, dignity and holiness lived. I believe it was born in the connection between the two

In another letter to Theo, he says,

“You [Theo], are kind to painters and I tell you, the more I think it over, the more I feel there is nothing more truly artistic than to love people.” “[Why] is it a sin to love, to need love, not to be able to live without love? I think a life without love is a sinful and immoral condition.”

“One cannot always tell what it is, that keeps us shut in, seems to bury us... But, one feels certain barriers, certain gates, certain walls... Do you know what frees one from this captivity, dear Theo? It is every deep serious affection. Being friends, being brothers. Love, that is what opens the prison by supreme power, by some magic force.”

But love, like almost every other venture Vincent entered into, was sadly misunderstood and unrequited. Early in his painting career, he fell deeply in love with a woman who, after a brief romance, rejected him. But even in this, he did not lose heart. Even in rejection, love did not die when he was turned away.

In another letter, he wrote:

In the first place I must ask you if you think it madness that there is a love serious and passionate enough not to be chilled even by many “never, no, nevers”?

I hope you might believe that, rather than madness, you might understand it as natural and reasonable.

For love is something so positive, so strong, so real that it is as impossible for one who loves to take back that feeling as it is to take his own life.

If you reply to this by saying, "But there are people who put an end to their own life," I simply answer, "I really do not think I am a man with such inclinations."

Life has become very dear to me, and I am very glad that I love. My life and my love are one. "But when you are faced with a 'never, no, never,' " 'what is your reply?' you might ask.

My answer to that is, "[Dear brother], for the present I look upon that 'never, no, never' as a block of ice which I press to my heart to thaw."

"...A block of ice which I press to my heart to thaw."

The irony is that Vincent Van Gogh, in the end, couldn't thaw a lifetime – and a world – of coldness. One evening, with a bullet to his heart, he ended his life.

*On that starry, starry night
You took your life as lovers often do
But I could have told you Vincent
This world was never meant for one as beautiful as you*

There is a madness at work in the world today. But the question remains. Is it a madness rooted in the absurd cruelties of the world - bombings and attacks based on polarizing ideologies? Or is it a madness born of a lost enthusiasm to risk our own light by going into the breach and extending a hand to those who are completely different than us. A failure to reach out even though we know we live with many of their same experiences of hurts and fears and protections.

Does it really matter in this world if we are Muslim or Christian or Jewish? What name we call God? "Or whether we see more clearly without any god being invoked?" Does it really matter if we're American or International? Black or White? Gay or straight? Does it really matter what sign hangs on the bunker we wandered into?

Does it really matter, in this congregation whether we are democrat or republican? Theist or non-theist? Conservative or liberal? Does it matter if we decide to use this form of governance or that one? Whether we hang one flag, a hundred flags or no flag? Whether we have one service or two or twenty?

Yes, it matters. Of course, it matters. As do all our opinions and perspectives. But if we think a decision to stand on one side of the line vs. the other side of the line is going to make a difference... if we think- choosing one point of view over another point of view – will help us finally find that love we come here seeking... will help us find that passion to be part of something great, that enthusiasmos that makes us – and our entire community – shine... then we are indeed part of the madness.

Whatever light we have to offer here is dependent not on one perspective winning over another but bringing all our perspectives together in community. We avoid bunkers not by digging our heels in or pacing back and forth in our own space, but when we refuse to be pre-occupied with 'winning' and 'losing' and return to looking out at the many different lights shining all around us. It begins when we're willing to traverse, respectfully, across differences. When we hold those 'never, no, nevers' like a block of ice against our hearts to thaw. When we peer into the trenches, reach out our hand and walk together.

To the Glory of Life.