

Excess and Contradiction

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Sermon for UUMAN, New Year's Eve, 2017

Good morning, and happy new year. I want to begin this new year's message in an unlikely place with a poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay. If you don't know Millay, do yourself a favor and look her up one day when you're killing time online. She's more interesting than Facebook, I promise.

Nowadays, if you hear someone is a poet, the image that probably pops to mind is a shabby, starving artist type whose "real job" probably has more to do with pulling espresso shots than weaving rhyme schemes. Or, maybe, more generously, we might imagine an earnest MFA student scraping along by teaching freshman comp and creative writing at community college.

But Millay is different. In her time, the 1910s and 20s, Millay's poetry made her a bona fide celebrity, an "it girl." She was an early bohemian and modernist who lived in Manhattan and contributed to a burgeoning subculture that embraced feminism, free love, non-normative gender roles, and art for art's sake—all a full 40 years before the beatniks and hippies would take up similar causes.

Here is the first poem from her most famous book, titled *A Few Figs from Thistles*, which you can also find printed in your order of worship.

"First Fig"

MY candle burns at both ends;
 It will not last the night;
 But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—
 It gives a lovely light!

Here, the speaker uses the image of a candle lit at both ends, a stock image or cliché, to describe living with bright, hot intensity. In this context, she is referring specifically to pursuing passionate love and bodily pleasures. And yet, as Millay is aware, this is not a sustainable way to live. Her candle "will not last the night." She's going to burn out, and she *knows* it.

But—and this is a crucial "but"—she then pivots. First, she addresses her "foes," reminding us that acts of beauty, creativity, and pleasure can also be acts of resistance. Then she addresses her friends and insists that they also acknowledge it's "lovely light."

I *love* this little poem. It's hard not to. If you think about it, her message is pure rock n' roll, right? Burn bright, flame out early, but create a moment of intense beauty as you do. This is Jimi

Hendrix before Jimi Hendrix was Jimi Hendrix. Or, to adapt Willard Motely, this is “living fast, dying young, and leaving a good-looking corpse” behind when you go.

Millay continues this defiant tone in the book’s second poem, which is also in your order of worship.

“Second Fig”

SAFE upon the solid rock the ugly houses stand:
Come and see my shining palace built upon the sand!

Millay continues her defiance when she points to the “ugly” houses built on solid rock. I imagine Millay might consider my own suburban house one of these “ugly houses. In the second line, Millay again pivots, but here she invites us to come join her in appreciating the luminous castle built upon sand and waiting to be washed away. These ugly houses and shining palaces are, of course, metaphors for all creative works, but the message is the same.

And The rest of the book continues in the same vein of celebrating temporary, fleeting beauty and brief, intense pleasures: Wednesday’s passionate love that fades away, without any drama or regret, by Thursday.

For Millay, celebrating intense and unsustainable beauty was her way of thumbing her nose at prudish Victorian traditions. The Victorian era, generally speaking, highly valued propriety and austerity. Women’s dresses covered everything below the chin and above the ankle—but don’t worry, their shoes covered everything *below* the ankle. The rising middle class did everything in their power to bring “respectability” to the working class. Social and gender roles were clearly prescribed. Millay and her ilk burst on the scene as the Victorian era was slowly dying, causing massive scandals and creating incredible art. (The two are rarely separable.)

These are clearly not poems about Christmas, or Hanukkah, or Kwanza, or even New Year’s Eve. Nevertheless, I think these poems have something to teach us about this time of year.

The holiday season—which, if charted by my own average consumption of sugar, fat, and adult beverages, stretches from the end of October to January 1st—is also a season of intense and unsustainable indulgence in the pleasurable things in life. The winter holidays are when, among other traditions, we eat the best foods and drink the best drinks and spend money freely—often to excess—and generally are much more inclined to cast away our concerns for tomorrow.

When I read Millay, as when I listen to Iggy Pop or Jimi Hendrix, I fall in love with the idea of living for today, and according to my waist line, that attitude extends to my holiday plate as well. Yes, I think, *that* is the good life—burn the candle at both ends and grasp that brief moment of perfect, transcendent satisfaction.

Yet I quickly find that chasing after these fleeting pleasures is, frankly, exhausting. As much as I want to live in the shining palace built upon the sand, I also want to retreat to my safe, boring, “ugly” house built on solid rock. And I equally find myself drawn to the austere, stoic ideals. Like a Victorian, I think yes, the good life is mastering your desires and not giving in to empty temptations.

Now, a psychologist might look at my predicament and call it “cognitive dissonance.” Cognitive dissonance is psychology’s term for the discomfort that comes from holding two contradictory beliefs in mind at the same time—like a smoker who knows that smoking causes lung cancer but continues to smoke, or a poor person who votes for the politician vowing to cut welfare.

Our culture, it seems to me, has an advanced case of cognitive dissonance when it comes to the holidays and over consumption.

On the one hand, we’re encouraged by friends, family, media, multinational corporations, and perhaps our own natural inclinations to go back for that second (or third) helping of cookies, or yet another glass of egg nog. Whether from nature or nurture, it seems right to pack on a few pounds come winter time.

On the other hand, we’re simultaneously afraid of overdoing it—or at least I am. Some of these anxieties are born out of real health concerns. We know the dangers of consuming sugar and alcohol excessively. Additionally, we in the United States have inherited many of the Puritan attitudes that saw indulging in pleasure as sinful. The original sin—eating the forbidden apple of knowledge—was a sin of overreaching appetite.

These are not new problems, of course. In fact, whole schools of philosophy have grown up to deal with these issues.

One name commonly evoked to justify over consumption is Epicurus, the ancient Greek philosopher whose name is the origin of Epicureanism. You may have seen issues of *Epicurean*, a magazine devoted to fine cooking and dining, in the grocery store checkout line, or *Epicurious*, a website for aspiring gourmets. Most people understand the philosophy of Epicureanism as about maximizing pleasure, especially the pleasure of eating and drinking, and as an adjective the word “Epicurean” denotes someone who is especially fond of luxurious consumption—so when we splurge on that prime rib roast, or throw an extra nob of butter into the skillet, or fill our glasses with another splash of punch, we’re all being little Epicureans. Just like when I read Millay’s injunction to live with fiery passion, I too feel a strong draw toward Epicurean delights. For instance, I’ve spent far more time than I’d ever admit studying—literally, *studying*—the techniques of great pizza making. (**Aside:** your dough *must* rise for at least 18 hours, don’t rush the proofing, slice toppings *thin*, super-hot oven.)

For Millay, as we saw a moment ago, embracing temporary beauty or pleasure was an act of defiance. She advocated bright, fiery passion in defiance of Victorian austerity. But is there anything defiant about eating more than you should during the holidays?

Maybe. The line that sprang to me when I was lying awake one night pondering this problem was the injunction to “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may be dead.” The origin of this phrase is Biblical. In the Biblical context, this phrase was used to call out the hypocrisy of people who pursued worldly pleasure at the expense of their souls—that’s how St. Paul uses it. and its sentiment has been evoked in literature for more than a millennium. The Roman poet Horace, for instance, coined the phrase *carpe diem* in a poem advising people to make the most of today, since we can’t know what the future has in store. You’ve probably heard “carpe diem” translated as “seize the day,” but according to one source I consulted, “carpe” means “to pluck”—as in to pluck a fruit when it is ripe, and I like how “plucking” involves a much more visceral sense than the militaristic “seizing.” The moment, this moment, *now*, is a ripe fruit for you to pluck.

In the English Renaissance, *carpe diem* poems became a whole subgenre of poetry. The poet Robert Herrick, for example, famously advised the young:

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying;
And this same flower that smiles today
To-morrow will be dying.

An even starker and wonderfully morbid illustration of this idea comes from ancient Egypt. A Roman historian, Herodotus, describes the Egyptian feasting rituals, which were elaborate affairs in wealthy households. Remember, Egypt at that time was a major world power, so a feast at a wealthy Egyptian house would be like New Year’s Eve at the Kardashian’s home—or so I imagine. Unlike the Kardashians—again, I assume—one aspect of Egyptian feasts is what has been called the “skeleton at the feast.” At the end of Egyptian feasts would end, according to Herodotus, a man would enter the room carrying a replica corpse or skeleton that was designed to look as realistic as possible. He would carry this corpse from guest to guest, saying to each “look on this, and drink, and be merry, for when thou art dead, such shalt thou be.” (19th cen. translation of Herodotus).

So in a way, maybe there is something defiant about how we celebrate the holidays by with over indulgence. *Maybe*, as these ancient sources suggest, excessive eating and drinking helps us feel extra alive and thus defies the only true inevitable—death.

But even if that is true, it’s no way to live, at least not long term. A candle that burns at both ends will not last the night. Despite his reputation, Epicurus *actually* cautioned against overconsumption. Yes, he did think that the way to a good life was to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, but he also recognized that too much overindulgence leads to pain, as I’m sure the majority the over-21 crowd has experienced on January 1st at least once. Ironically, in fact, what Epicurus actually advocated wouldn’t fit well within *Epicurean* magazine. What we today call Epicureanism might be better labeled hedonism—the pursuit of pleasure above all else.

Epicurus, though, does not argue that we should only pursue pleasure and avoid pain. Rather, he advises us to work to attain a state of being he called *ataraxia*.

Ataraxia is usually translated as being tranquil or unperturbed. In a state of *ataraxia*, there would be no need to wheel out a skeleton at the end of a feast, because there would be no feast. What Epicurus actually taught is that, when we free ourselves from the unnecessary pain caused by our minds, we need very little to be satisfied—simple food shared with friends in a peaceful setting is pleasure enough. He is very Buddhist, in fact: pain causes us to seek pleasure, but overindulgence in pleasure causes more pain.

I've wrestled with the cognitive dissonance of indulgence and austerity for a long time, and the closest I've come to finding an answer is by thinking of it as seasonal. To every thing, there is a season. Millay's season of indulgence and fun followed the Victorian season of propriety and restraint. So if you feel the holidays have been excessive, as mine certainly have, consider following the advice of the stoic philosopher Seneca, who encouraged a close friend to "vaccinate" himself against hardship by practicing austerity. Set aside a certain number of days, Seneca wrote, during which you eat meager, coarse food, all the while asking what it was about this condition that you feared. "Endure all this for three or four days at a time, sometimes for more, so that it may be a test of yourself instead of a mere hobby. Then, I assure you... you will leap for joy when filled with a pennyworth of food, and you will understand that a man's peace of mind does not depend upon Fortune; for, even when angry she grants enough for our needs."

And if you've planned a New Year's Eve party for tonight, consider inviting a skeleton.

Thank you for listening, and happy new year.

Postscript:

Several people asked me about Millay after the service. If you'd like to read *A Few Figs from Thistles*, you can find a first edition online here for free:
<http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/millay/figs/figs.html>