

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
 11 December, 2022

The Light's Bounty on Familiar Things¹

With deepest thanks to Rev. Galen Guengrich

Hailing from the Caribbean island, Saint Lucia,² West Indian poet Derek Walcott, wrote an elegy to his mother, known as Teacher Alix, evoking sardines with pepper sauce, crescent melons, the blue hills in late afternoon.

“In the bells of tree-frogs with their steady clamour, in the indigo dark before dawn, the fading morse³ of fireflies and crickets, then light on the beetle’s armour.... Your melody faltered,” he says, “but never your faith in the bounty which is His Word.” “My business and duty,” he concludes, “the lesson you taught your sons, [is] to write of the light’s bounty on familiar things.”⁴

I first learned this lesson in the AIDS years, when suddenly, we had so little time to get it right. And I have had to relearn it, over and over: A good life is not lived from fireworks to fireworks. It is lived, said Swiss-American psychiatrist, Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, by paying attention to the ordinary, and by stringing the small, precious moments like pearls on a strand of silk.

Warrior and peacemaker Chief Crowfoot, who led the Siksika First Nation, asked,

What is life?
 It is the flash of a firefly in the night.
 It is the breath of a buffalo in wintertime.

¹ This title is from a line in Derek Walcott’s *The Bounty*. Please see allpoetry.com/poem/14327964-The-Bounty-by-Derek-Walcott

² pronounced LOO-shah

³ “morse,” meaning “code”

⁴ Thanks to Rev. Galen Guengrich for the inspiration for this sermon. Please see Rev. Galen Guengrich, *A Single Glorious Thing*, 11/21/22, at allsouls-nyc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/A-Single-Glorious-Thing-11-21-21.pdf

It is the little shadow that runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset.⁵

We can make our own list, name the pearls:

A beautiful piece of music
the sound a freshly-stamped birthday card makes
when it drops into the mailbox
Your breath catching
as cold air fills your lungs and reddens your cheeks
The smell of mulled cider
Sunrise, in spite of everything.

Attend to the light's bounty on familiar things.

In her book *High Tide at Tucson*, American novelist Barbara Kingsolver writes, “In my life, I’ve had frightening losses and unfathomable gifts: ... A car that spontaneously caught fire while I was driving it. Sunrise in a rain forest.... The end of a marriage, followed by a year in which I could barely understand how to keep living... A stupendous column of blue butterflies rising from a Greek monastery.

“Every one of us is called upon,” she writes, “probably many times, to start a new life.... At first ... it’s impossible to think ... how this ... will be possible. Eventually, what moves it all forward is the subterranean ebb and flow of being alive among the living.

“In my own worst seasons,” she concludes, “I’ve come back from the colorless world of despair by forcing myself to look hard, for a long time, at a single thing: a flame of red geranium [in] my bedroom window.... my daughter in a yellow dress.... the perfect outline of a full, dark sphere behind the crescent moon.... until I learned to be in love with ... life again....

“I have taught myself joy, over and over....”⁶

Persian Sufi mystic Rumi, asks “When you go to a garden, do you look at thorns or flowers? Spend more time,” he advises, “with roses and jasmine.”⁷

⁵ Chief Crowfoot, as quoted in Jack Kornfield, *A Lamp in the Darkness*, p. 91

⁶ Thanks to Rev. Galen Guengrich for Barbara Kingsolver, *op cit*

⁷ Rumi, as quoted in Jack Kornfield, *op cit*, p. 96

Attend to the light's bounty on familiar things.

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Years ago, when my friend Maria's youngest sister was all but immobilized in the grip of a deep depression, Maria brought her to come live with her. I watched her midwife her sister back to health, bringing her out into the garden to tend to small sections at a time, edging and weeding — just this rose bush; just this row of carrots. During frequent rest breaks, Maria served iced tea with fresh lemon and mint; small, thin slices of fruit; half a rice cake with a little almond butter — not too much, so as to overwhelm, but just enough to tempt her sister back to health. And then they would wash and dry those few dishes and put them away together. Slowly but surely, once again, her sister's world was re-enchanted by healing power of “the light's bounty on familiar things.”

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Ross Gay is a professor of English at Indiana and Drew Universities, author of four books of poetry, and founding board member of the Bloomington Community Orchard, which he describes as “a nonprofit, free-fruit-for all food justice and joy project.” Two of his poems are featured in the anthology *African-American Poetry: 250 Years of Struggle and Song*.

In *The Book of Delights*, Ross Gay writes, “It astonishes me sometimes — no, often — how every person I get to know — everyone, regardless of everything, by which I mean everything — lives with some profound personal sorrow.... But sometimes,” he adds, “something wonderful breaks through our feelings of sorrow and loss. If only for a moment, we feel a sense of delight, even joy.”

Ross Gay created a way to remember delight and to build what he calls his “delight muscle:” Every day, he creates a short piece on one delight, drafting them quickly, writing by hand. This, he says, is “a discipline for me; a [spiritual] practice: Spend time thinking and writing about delight every day.”

And what did he learn? “The more you study delight,” he writes, “the more delight there is to study.... Which is to say, I [feel] my life to be more full of delight — not without [fear or pain or loss or sorrow], but more full of delight. I also learned this year that my delight grows — much like love and joy — when I share it.”

Here's one of those sketches. It's titled, “Tomato on Board.”⁸

⁸ #80

“What you don’t know until you carry a tomato seedling through the airport and onto a plane is that [it] will make people smile at you almost like you’re carrying a baby. A quiet baby. I [didn’t] know this until today, carrying my little tomato, about three ... inches high in its four-inch plastic starter pot, which my friend Michael gave to me, smirking about how I was going to get it home....

“I slid the thing into my bag while going through security, which made them pull the bag for inspection. When the security guy saw it was a tomato, he smiled and said, ‘I don’t know how to check that. Have a good day.’ But I quickly realized that one of its stems (I almost said ‘arms’) was broken from the jostling, and it only had four of them, so I decided I better just carry it out in the open. And the shower of love began.

“Before boarding ... my flight, one of the workers said, ‘Nice tomato,’ which I don’t think was a [pick-up line]. And the flight attendant asked about the tomato [more than once], every time calling it ‘my tomato’ — ‘Where’s my tomato?’ ‘How’s my tomato?’ She even directed me to an open seat in the exit row: Why don’t you guys go sit there and stretch out?

“I gathered my things and set the li’l guy in the window seat so she could look out. When I got my water, I poured some into the li’l guy’s soil. When we got bumpy, I put my hand on the li’l guy’s container, careful not to snap off another arm. And when we landed, and the pilot put the brakes on hard, my arm reflexively went across the seat, holding the li’l guy in place, the way my dad’s arm would when he had to brake hard in that car without seatbelts, ... in one of my very favorite gestures in the encyclopedia or human gestures.”⁹

The light’s bounty on familiar things.

Many years ago, when our youngest daughters were very small, I wanted to recreate a beloved Christmas tradition for them that my grandfather had given to me. As they watched *Sesame Street*, I crept around the house and put electric candles in each of the windows. When I had finished, I picked them up, one in each arm — *Close your eyes for a surprise! No peeking!* — and carried them out into the moonless, frosty night.

I faced the house. *Count with me now: One, two, three! Now open!*

⁹ Thanks to Galen Guengrich for Ross Gay, *op cit*

“O, Mommy,” said Jamie, “it’s magic!”
 Jessye, the baby, laughed with delight.

Late that night, long after I’d tucked them in, I sat in a rocking chair in a room illuminated only by electric candle light. I thought of the years, so many Christmas times, when my grandfather had led me out of the house — *Close your eyes for a surprise! No peeking!* — and counted to three: *Now open!* It was always a surprise, all over again; it never got old. And now, I had taken up that strand of pearls, once again, and added one more. My children never met him, but they knew him, knew him in the light’s bounty on familiar things.

Beloved spiritual companions,

May we spend time every day
 thinking about delight,
 stringing small, precious moments
 like pearls on a strand of silk.

Let us teach ourselves joy, over and over,
 and may the shower of love begin.

So may we re-enchant the world
 with the healing power
 of the light’s bounty on familiar things.

Close your eyes for a surprise! Now open!