

HYACINTHS, BISCUITS... AND THE FRAGRANCE OF LIFE

“To feel religiously is to speak with the tongues of poets...
Like the language of art, poetry, and friendship, the language of religion
is suggestive, not descriptive or definitive”
(Bernard Meland)

Carl Sandburg (1878–1967), the widely regarded American poet, author, Chicago journalist,
and three-times Pulitzer Prize winner—twice for poetry,
once defined poetry as ‘the synthesis of hyacinths and biscuits’.

Intrigued, I began to search for its context.
Now I didn’t discover where he actually placed the comment—in a poem, that is—
but I did find where hundreds of others have quoted it.
So I am prepared to accept it as a genuine Sandburg saying.

By-the-way, of poetry Sandburg also wrote nearly 40 other so-called ‘definitions’.
Some of those are:

Poetry is a phantom script telling how rainbows are made and why they go away.
Poetry is an echo, asking a shadow to dance.
Poetry is the opening and closing of a door, leaving those who look through to guess about
what is seen during the moment.

It wasn’t until I read the comments of another poet, who also wrestled with his
‘hyacinths/biscuits’ definition, that I reckoned I began to appreciate
some of the meanings attributed to it that made it attractive to many.
‘The putting together of unlike things to give us a new view of our world’.

(Joan Monahan)

A ‘synthesis’ view of life.

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As it happens one of my theological mentors, Bernard Meland (1899–1993),
said of Sandburg’s poetry comment that it also defines life,
“forlife, too, is a synthesis of biscuits and hyacinths.” *(Meland 1934:279)*
(Meland changed the order...)

Nearly 90 years ago (I only discovered it recently in his earlier writings) Meland wrote.
“The biscuits are the mills that grind the wheat into flour; they are the train wheels that
carry the flour to the bakeries; and the wagons that deliver the loaves to the grocer,
and to hungry humanity. Biscuits are the rugged, commonplace essentials of life. They are
the whole wheat of life. Hyacinths, on the other hand, represent the loveliness of life.
They grace the garden walls. They breathe fragrance into the world. They send the chills
up and down one’s spine, and evoke the “Ohs!” and “Ahs!” Hyacinths create our
precious memories: a baby’s smile, the lover’s caress, the parent’s fondness for his
child. Hyacinths are the glorious, stirring ecstasies of a buoyant heart. They bloom
on a clear, cold, moonlight night, and they blend their color with the calm, quiet sunset.
Hyacinths are all those many things and experiences which enhance life with mystery,
color, and fragrance.” *Meland 1934:279)*

Meland goes on to say,

value “All that we do, and everything we handle, combines these two sides of life, for it is the nature of nature to synthesise biscuits and hyacinths... The one suggests relative value in the sense of being a means toward an end; the other suggests intrinsic value in the sense of being, itself, an end.” (*Meland 1934:279-280*)

The two sides of life are commonly called the ‘practical’ or ‘utility/mechanical’ (instrumental) and the ‘aesthetic/ideal’ (intrinsic).

And our Western society has always placed more value on the ‘practical’ rather than the ‘aesthetic’.

Perhaps this is why he ‘who is currently moonlighting as our prime minister’, gave a financial handout to sales people and bar staff during the 2020 Covid lockdowns, but not to the arts—dancers, musicians, poets!

In traditional religion the ‘two sides’ are often represented as: ‘Doing the will of God’ *verses* ‘Be still, and know that I am God’. This difference in religious sensibilities has been an important factor throughout history the world over.

But in reality the aesthetic and the practical are two sides of the one world.

“Our environment,” writes empirical theologian Meland again, “is vaster and richer at any one moment than we ever consciously recognize during working hours when utility is in the saddle.” (*Meland 1934:288*)

So what does ‘being aesthetic’ mean?

Again I offer the wisdom of Bernard Meland.

and broad “Being aesthetic means reaching out beyond the obvious and the useful to this vaster and richer content that environs us. This aspect is the opposite of standardization. It tends toward innovation. It cultivates spontaneity, originality, deep insight, sympathy. It gives dimension and intensity to life. The only way to achieve this aesthetic measure of life is by frequently exposing one-self to the awesome, the mystifying, and the inspiring. Live in the presence of that which gives altitude to emotions. Enter frequently into deepening contact with the wide cosmic expanse of life. Turn from the critical mood occasionally to see life in synthesis. See the world synthesized in a flower, a sea, or in a human being. Catch glimpses of the whole of reality. Contemplate your own life blended with the total movement of life. Envisaging these wider reaches of reality not only enlarges the scope of living, but it sensitizes our feel for life and beautifies its quality.” (*Meland 1934:288*)

Or, listen to the wisdom of poet Mary Oliver—another Pulitzer Prize winner. A strong sense of place, and of identity in relation to it, is central to her poetry.

Her creativity was stirred by nature, and her poems are filled with imagery from daily walks: shore birds, water snakes, the phases of the moon, and humpback whales.

“Just pay attention to the natural world around you—the goldfinches, the swan, the wild geese. They will tell you what you need to know.” (*Franklin 2017*)

When reviewing Oliver’s work one literary critic wrote:

“Her poems are firmly located in the places where she has lived or traveled... her moments of transcendence arise organically from the realities of swamp, pond, and shore.”
woods

While another commented:

“At its most intense, her poetry aims to peer beneath the constructions of culture and reason that burden us with an alienated consciousness to celebrate the primitive, mystical visions of the natural world.”

Pay attention!

Experience!

Imagine!

Such attention and experience comes from being immersed in what is, and seeing the overlooked.

As another has said: we are cosmic and we are local. (*Fleischman 2013:165*)

The natural world is all around us, and we are an integral part of it.

Appreciation of the benefits of nature—of being at home in the universe and the environment in which we must fulfil our lives—

is an ancient wisdom we are only barely beginning to regain, as the Earth heats, glaciers melt, rainforests are logged, and species vanish.

At times we will seek to *critically understand* and to use those enviroing realities.

And a poetic response is often the most appropriate

and shrewdest analyst of social concerns

including frustrated hopes and political skulduggery.

At other times we will respond *appreciatively* to the deep significance of these environings.

As I have said on another occasion: we need both the voice of the rational

—to keep any community free from sloppy sentimentality—

as well as the concern of the creative artist

—the rich, deep, not entirely rational forms of expression shaped by metaphor, the poetic, myth and parable—to strike a chord and resonate within.

But it is at the level of the imagination that any full engagement with life takes place.

Thus, what is now required is a different religious sensitivity.

A natural spirituality or an ecological spirituality.

Because nature is the thread that completes the tapestry of life.¹

“Whether or not we believe that there is something more, nature is so significant that all our beliefs must be reformulated so as to take nature into account.” (*Hefner 2008:x*)

Religion is born out of the sense of wonder and awe of the majesty and fearsomeness of the universe itself. (*Berry 2014:74*)

But religion is also poetry—at least according to ‘geologist’, Thomas Berry.

In an interview with Australian church historian and former priest,

Paul Collins, Berry claimed:

“Religion is poetry or it is nothing! How can a person be religious without being poetic?

Certainly God is a poet; it is God who made rainbows, butterflies and flowers. It is the

¹ A ‘theory of naturalised spirituality’ can be found in Jerome Stone. *Sacred Nature*, 76-80

most absurd thing in the world to think of dealing with religion in any other way than poetry
or music... You cannot do it any other way.” (Collins 2010)

But then Collins went on to add:

“Deprived of nature with its beauty, multiplicity, mystery, complexity and otherness, our imaginations would shrivel up, and we would lose our ability to perceive and experience the deeper feelings and intuitions that give real meaning to our lives. For nature is the source of our origin and the context of our continuing evolution and spiritual development. Without imagination we would lose all sense of ourselves as human beings.”

Life glows on! Such is the poetics of life.

All those many things and experiences which enhance life
with mystery, colour, and fragrance. Biscuits and hyacinths included!

“As we consider this Earth,
our home,
and we, our presence upon it,
may we be moved to see ourselves
as particles of the whole
and walk in reverence.” (Vosper 2012)

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Now, just for the record...

Searching in some well-known places I discovered some interesting ‘facts’ about hyacinths.

- Originally from the Mediterranean, Iran and Turkmenistan, now grown mainly in Holland
- Each flower colour has a unique fragrance—used extensively in perfume making
- Bulbs are poisonous—contain oxalic acid which is so strong it can remove rust
- Because the juice of the hyacinth plant is so naturally sticky, it was used as a book binding glue hundreds of years ago

The hyacinth appears in the first stanza of T.S. Eliot’s poem ‘*The Waste Land*’ during a conversation between the narrator and the “hyacinth girl”

that takes place in the spring.

"You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
"They called me the hyacinth girl."
—Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence."

While a modern poem is '*Resurgence of Life*'
written in March 2021 by Jenna Logan, has echoes of the originating myth.

"Sunlight kisses lush petals of lavender and hyacinth,
as a zephyr breeze stirs their sweet perfume.

"I am enrapt at the sight of such splendor.
Tea roses have budded, and will soon open velvet petals to line my cobblestone walkway.
Hummingbirds are visiting morning glory and tulips.
What a delightful Spring morning!
garden awash
with resurgence of life ~
spring symbiosis."

Legend has it the origin of hyacinth, the highly fragrant, bell-shaped flower,
can be traced back to a young Greek boy named Hyakinthos.

As the story goes, two gods—Apollo the sun god, and Zephyr the god of the west wind—
adored Hyakinthos and competed for his attention.

One day, while Apollo was teaching Hyakinthos the art of throwing a discus,
Zephyr, in a jealous rage, blew the discus back,
killing Hyakinthos with a strike to the head.

Apollo, brokenhearted, notices that a flower springs up from the blood that was spilled
and names the flower 'hyacinth' in honour of the boy.

Colours:

Violet/Blue	Sorrow, Regret
White	Prayer, Loveliness
Pink/Red	Play
Yellow	Jealousy