

This Is Our Time To ‘Flaunt A Red Flower’

The reading for today is the opening statement from a book of poetry, *Color*, by Countess Cullen. It is entitled “To You Who Read My Book,” and it says about everything that needs to be said.

Soon every sprinter,
However fleet,
Comes to a winter
 Of sure defeat:
Though he may race
 Like the hunted doe,
Time has a pace
 To lay him low.

Soon we who sing,
 However high,
Must face the Thing
 We cannot fly.
Yea, though we fling
 Our notes to the sun,
Time will outsing
 Us every one.

All things must change
 As the wind is blown;
Time will estrange
 The flesh from the bone.
The dream shall elude
 The dreamer’s clasp,
And only its hood
 Shall comfort his grasp.

A little while,
 Too brief at most,
And even my smile
 Will be a ghost.
A little space,
 A Finger’s crook,
And who shall trace

The path I took?

Who shall declare
My whereabouts;
Say if in the air
My being shouts
Along light ways,
Or if in the sea,
Or deep earth stays
The germ of me?
Ah, none knows, none,
Save (but too well)
The Cryptic One
Who will not tell.

This is my hour
To wax and climb,
Flaunt a red flower
In the face of time.
And only an hour
Time gives, then snap
Goes the flower,
And dried is the sap.

Juice of the first
Grapes of my vine,
I proffer your thirst
My own heart's wine.
Here of my growing
A red rose sways,
Seed of my sowing,
And work of my days.

(I run, but time's
Abreast with me;
I sing, but he climbs
With my highest C.)

Drink while my blood
Colors the wine,
Reach while the bud
Is still on the vine . . .

Then. . .
When the hawks of death
Tear at my throat

Till song and breath
Ebb note by note,
Turn to this book
Of the mellow word
For a singing look
At a stricken bird.

Say, "This is the way
He chirped and sung,
In the sweet heyday
When his heart was young.
Though his throat is bare,
By death defiled,
Song labored there
And bore a child."

When the dreadful Ax
Rives me apart,
When the sharp wedge cracks
My arid heart,
Turn to this book
Of the singing me
For a springtime look
At the wintry tree.

Say, "Thus it was weighed
With flower and fruit,
Ere the Ax was laid
Unto its root.
Though the blows fall free
On a gnarled trunk now,
Once he was a tree
With a blossomy bough."

"This is my hour to wax and climb, flaunt a red flower in the face of time."
Countee Cullen registers that the logic of life is living. And it ought to be full of the urgency that is indicated rather graphically by the moving sequence of time. Most people I encounter think that the logic of life is planning, preparing – tomorrow, next month, next year. "I want to, but . . . I'll get to it." As a matter of fact, it seems to me that religion itself has entered with questionable theories that, in effect, rob us of the sense of the unrelieved immediacy of life. And most of us were taught to prepare for some other life beyond death. Consequently, our coming together in worship becomes a kind of

insurance against some future event, rather than a celebration of the expectancy about living this moment.

All the while, life continues to be a story of encounter with the living, and the persons we remember and to whom we pay tribute, are persons who found the secret, not of death, but the secret of living: persons in whose life we saw and see an intensity that is uncommon, and we sense that that intensity has something to do with a larger measure of involvement and openness to the aliveness of Creation.

If we're not careful, the Church itself becomes a studied ritual in the celebration of death, and the way through the grave – and we call it the Eucharist. And then instead of dealing with the obvious, essential mysteries that are all around us, we create new ones. We have bells ringing, and bread that turns into flesh, and wine that turns into blood. And even though you don't worship at those altars, those altars inform your religious sensibilities. And we come away from such hocus-pocus believing that maybe death is not death.

I'm with Countee Cullen. Death is death. And maybe it is one of the mysteries of creation. Maybe it is the counterpart to the mystery to Life. By definition, mysteries are not to be quickly analyzed and understood. Probably the best statement we could make about Life is that it is lived in the midst of mystery. We must search it beyond the obvious, apparent meanings for hidden significance. Without that, what is Life? What is Death? The best we know is that there is this thing we call Life, and there will come, on a schedule we're not sure of, something that is known as Death. If the Church could be honest it would say, "That we know," and we would not get trapped in the things that shield us from that reality.

Death has become something we don't deal with at all, and don't know much about. We think it's gruesome. It may be informing if we were to look at it – look at its face, understand it, and understand that whether we like it or not, it is a part of what God has done. The twisted body. Ugly you say? Who told you? It may be just the way death

addresses us. But we are not prepared to be that open. And, consequently, we aren't prepared to live very much.

If you leap to the text, you begin to be aware of the fact that the mystery of Life is closely related to the mystery of Death. And it's not gruesome. It's just a fact. We don't know any more than what Countee Cullen is saying. Life ought to be explored, thoroughly, while it is alive. Because one has the sneaking suspicion that whatever Death is, it takes care of its own exploration without our having to program it here. If one does not explore life, thoroughly, one may not have another chance.

It seems to me that this is what Jesus was about. He had this crazy idea that no corner of my life should be left unturned by me – not next week, not this afternoon – NOW! Because time keeps reminding me as it changes guard, that, “You haven't got forever!” That fact has been interpreted as a morbid thought. No! It's exciting to know that you don't have forever. I would hate to think that you'd have forever to do whatever it is you've got on your mind. Some religion ought to declare that the critical domain for religious living is Life – Now! Do something that has purpose to the world while we are still able to see it and understand it. I don't care what you call it. It's not worth anything if you won't live it. How do we get you excited about the breath you're breathing; the blood that's flowing through your veins? How do you understand that it is, indeed, your opportunity? And maybe all that we will know about you is how you used that opportunity now. And, if we have to put it in God talk, you've got so many hours to reveal what, in your best consciousness, God had in mind for you. Undressed of all the junk and dogmatic and liturgical stuff, you are alive – an exposition of what God had in mind – and, therefore, you should live!

It's registered fervently in our scriptures that you must get on with it because life is not only brief, but to the best of our understanding, basically tragic. Is that an exaggeration of the scriptures? Read the 90th Psalm if you don't think that's there. You don't even have to bother with Job. The best insight is that the early Jewish community decided that the 90th Psalm's insight was so critical, they said that Moses knew it. Tragic, brief. Therefore, its opportunity must be seized. The Psalmist finds the only place he can

stand is on an insight that suggests that since God did this, God understands it. God is not controlled or conditioned by it. And he tells us that by saying, “For with you a thousand days and nights are the same.” He says, there is a wisdom beyond this that gives it meaning, and if I stand on that ground, then I can find the security to life.

What is being suggested here is something also that Jesus talks about when he says, though this is a transitory place, and the moments keep moving by, this place can have significance if one gets ahead of the moment and packs it full of the experience of living. This won't stop the passing of time, but time will not pass you by. As it passes it will bear upon itself the imprint of your living. It is a way of absorbing the time in our own intentionality, in our own commitment, absorbing the time, filling it up, packing it full. And when that happens, Jesus said, you discover a secret -- though time is moving in steady pace, it has the power to contain insights and aliveness far beyond itself. That's what Jesus calls eternity. He says, one does not have to be victimized by the passing moment, if one gives oneself in steady commitment to one's best perception of what one's life could mean to the increase of justice, mercy, righteousness. Then one participates in that which penetrates time – gives time its meaning but is not contained by it – known as eternity. It has nothing to do with death. As a matter of fact, I believe that if you do not experience that dimension of consciousness which we call eternal, which moves you through commitment and works behind that commitment beyond the normal cultural assessment of what is true – if you do not experience that in this life, then don't you kid yourself. When you're dead, you won't ever experience it. Why do you think you are going to experience it automatically when you die?

This is your opportunity. We have an amazing opportunity now to know things far beyond time. One of the things that we have is Life's secret investment. The mind, the imagination, the experience, the spirit, can penetrate the moment, and through committed living can fill it up and own it. You can go on like you're going, planning for the future and knowing that that is the practical thing to do, and maybe you won't even know that you didn't live. That may be the blessing of death. What is more important than what people are going to say about me is what I am about to say now about myself and do

about it. That is the most important thing. Difficult? Yes. But now is my hour to wax and climb, now is my opportunity to flaunt a red flower in the face of time.

What is that about? To flaunt a red flower is to give time a testimony of the eternity registered in me – to bloom as a flower blooms from the depths of life's secret; to give color and profusion to existence because I am. Now is my time to do it. Don't preach me into immortality, but would to God that you would say, I think he had a little experience of it while he was here because of the way he behaved – not because of the way he talked, but because of the way he behaved.

That's it! This is your hour! This is your time to live! Make it your time. In this community we will not only live together, we will also die in each other's midst. And all that we will have brought is what we did while we were here.

The Church has you believing that you will have a great getting up, and you will get up to heaven. That may be, but we have this time now to pack full of life as we sense it flowing in us. It is your decision. This is the hour to wax and climb, to flaunt a red flower in the face of time. Now.