

Chapel Talk
Elizabeth Roach
January 8, 2021

Hard Gold to Love

When I wrote this talk, I didn't know that I'd be giving it within the context of an insurrection, an assault on the fundamental tenets of our democracy and the humanity of the American people. At the same time, I had a foreboding sense—along with many others—that the words and behavior of the President and the lack of an appropriate response from many other leaders in our government and the media could, in fact, lead to something unprecedented. This talk, when I first wrote it and even more so now, is a response to the profoundly unsettling racism, sexism, bigotry, and the deep lack of regard for the problematic history of this country that we have been witnessing the past four years and that we have yet to contend with honestly and constructively over the past four hundred years.

My message today concerns the power of learning, of understanding, of enlightenment. These processes are critical as we begin to understand what took place this week and as we move forward and strive to enact change. At St. Andrew's, we are given the gift of knowledge and learning, a gift that we can't take for granted, a gift that we need to honor and pursue with vigor and responsibility. Many of us know that the events of Wednesday were not, in many ways, unprecedented, but rather rooted in a long history of oppression and denial of others' humanity. Making sense of our country's violent history and present is a long learning process. The importance and beauty of the learning process, which I will try to outline today, will be crucial in the coming months and years in America. It's a learning process that I hope we will all engage in deeply both within and outside of our classrooms, both at St. Andrew's and beyond.

William Carlos Williams' "The Gift"—that Faye read so beautifully—is a poem that I revisit at this time every year. It is a poem about the miracle of life and the mysterious power of a mother's ability to give life to and nourish her baby. It's also a poem about the miracle of discovery, of understanding, of illumination.

As we read the poem, Williams invites us to make the same journey of discovery as the wise men. We walk with the wise men, following the star to "the humble birthplace of the god of love" and try to understand the gravity of this moment. Although they have brought valuable riches, their gifts are

“unsuitable” for a child. And instead of the child receiving these gifts, the gift that Williams refers to in the title of the poem manifests in the images of the child being fed and the wise men full of wonder.

But as they kneeled
the child was fed.

They saw it
and
gave praise!

A miracle
had taken place,
hard gold to love,
a mother's milk!
before
their wondering eyes.

No matter how many times I read and reread this poem, I’m arrested by the line: “Hard gold to love, a mother’s milk!” What exactly does Williams mean here? “Hard gold to love.” Something tangible to something intangible. Something monetarily valuable to something impossible to put a price on. Something materialistic to something spiritual, emotional. Interestingly, even though Williams moves from the material (gold) to the ephemeral (love), he makes sure that he gives us a concrete image for love as well (a mother’s milk). So, how exactly does this transformation occur?

Williams reminds us that the seemingly simple and ordinary relationship between a mother and child—something we may even take for granted—is, in fact, extraordinary. A mother not only creates life within her body but then sustains that life outside the womb when she feeds her baby. It’s a profound act of selflessness and sustenance, of connection and reciprocity. With this one image of “hard gold to love, a mother’s milk!” Williams encompasses everything we need to find meaning in life, capturing the essence and beauty and awe-inspiring love of a mother and child.

But the miracle is multilayered here.

The wise men’s recognition of this miracle is also extraordinary. By attending closely to what they see, they undergo a transformation and understand that the most valuable thing they can offer is not their riches but love, a version perhaps of the astonishing love that a mother feels for her child.

Paradoxically, the sight of the baby and mother—the beauty, simplicity, poverty, innocence, and feminine power of it—overwhelms the wise men who are symbolic of age, wealth, masculinity, power, and wisdom.

Furthermore, by giving us the transmutation of hard gold to love, Williams highlights the mental process that the wise men undergo to see and understand, to recognize and discover. This process, in part, rests on the wise men's ability to move from the tangible to the intangible and then back to the tangible in an almost seamless way: from gold to love to a mother's milk—a process that requires openness and agility and that, in the end, produces wonder, an epiphany if you will.

One of the reasons, I think, that I became a teacher is that I have so many distinctive memories of feeling a sense of wonder in classrooms, starting from the moment when I could read in kindergarten, the words suddenly making sense on a page and creating a story that I could experience all by myself! This, to me, was miraculous. I could immerse myself in books, in stories, in the lives of other people—both fictional and real—in the endless world of the imagination. I wanted to replicate this sense of wonder throughout my years in school, and then I wanted to replicate it for my students in my own classroom. What I didn't anticipate is that while I tried to offer my students the miracle of discovery, I too could continue to discover through my students, through their insights and revelations, through their joy and wonder.

This is what teaching and learning looks like in the St. Andrew's classroom every day. We read and problem solve and experiment; we bring ideas and concepts and theories to the seminar tables and labs, and we come together to sharpen and refine these abstractions and hypotheses with one another, making what may have been not fully understood or formed into something whole, something alive and exciting, something that makes us think further and wonder.

I've realized, too, that for wonder and discovery to happen, there must be rigorous preparation, sustained commitment, and deep engagement combined with being open to possibility. This equation of hard work and openness allows for the magic to happen. The wise men, carrying their gifts, made their long and arduous journey and prepared themselves to meet and honor the god of love. But they also stayed open to the moment, and in doing so, they discovered something unexpected: the meaning of life contained within the beautiful act of a mother feeding her baby. The awe they experience when

seeing “this perfection” is the result of their active pursuit of understanding, and their reward—the gift they receive—is both inspiring and humbling.

If we use the wise men as examples of lifelong learners—after all, even though they are “wise men,” they still have a lot to learn, according to Williams—then we can all strive for moments of discovery and illumination, no matter how old we are or where we are or what we’re doing, no matter if we’re restricted by health and safety measures or released from the constraints and protocols of the pandemic. We have our minds; we have the potential to learn; we have our experiences in the classrooms at St. Andrew’s; we have the capacity to sustain our focus and commitment; we have the ability to stay open and learn and love and make important changes in our communities and the world.

We only need the image of a mother feeding her child—a template of humility and generosity—to remind ourselves of the potential for love, learning, humanity, and goodness, the potential, in essence, of everyday miracles all around us.

With this in mind, we affirm life and the art of living—as well as the art of education that Alexander Nemerov spoke so beautifully about earlier this year—by actively pursuing and staying open to epiphanies. The devils in the poem retreat because they have no place within the life giving presence of a mother. Death loses its power—is “nothing”—beside the miracle of a baby. The gift, therefore, is not what the Magi bring to Mary and Jesus, but rather, the unadorned majesty of a mother nourishing her child and the wise men’s ability to understand that simple magnificence.

In her Christmas post “Why Adore a Baby,” Becca Stevens—an Episcopal priest and the founder of Thistle Farms who visited St. Andrew’s last year and will be talking with us again this winter—urges us, in similar ways as Williams, to consider the miracle of a baby within the context of this year, to keep our hearts and minds open and to actively pursue meaning. This is the gift available to all of us. She writes:

“Come let us adore the baby Jesus with hearts tempered by this year, but still able to wonder. Let us remember as we contemplate him in our hearts, the power in the powerless, the warmth of a star shining in the night, and how babies keep us loving the world with our whole hearts.”

"The Gift"

As the wise men of old brought gifts
guided by a star
to the humble birthplace

of the god of love,
the devils
as an old print shows
retreated in confusion.

What could a baby know
of gold ornaments
or frankincense and myrrh,
of priestly robes
and devout genuflections?

But the imagination
knows all stories
before they are told
and knows the truth of this one
past all defection

The rich gifts
so unsuitable for a child
though devoutly proffered,
stood for all that love can bring.

The men were old
how could they know
of a mother's needs
or a child's
Appetite?

But as they kneeled
the child was fed.

They saw it
and
gave praise!

A miracle
had taken place,
 hard gold to love,
a mother's milk!
 before
 their wondering eyes.

The ass brayed
 the cattle lowed.
It was their nature.

All men by their nature give praise.
 It is all
 they can do.

The very devils
 by their flight give praise.
 What is death,
beside this?
Nothing. The wise men
 came with gifts
and bowed down
 to worship
 this perfection.