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OUR LAST AWAKENING

Poems for living in the face of death

Janet Morley

SPCK

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In memory of Alison, and all my beloved dead

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Introduction

Bring us, Lord our God,
at our last awakening,
into the house and gate of heaven,
to enter into that gate,
and dwell in that house,
where there shall be
no darkness nor dazzling
but one equal light;
no noise nor silence,
but one equal music;
no fears nor hopes,
but one equal possession;
no ends nor beginnings,
but one equal eternity;
in the habitation of your glory and dominion,
world without end, Amen.

When we think about dying, when we can bear to, it is easy to assume that it involves an increasingly gloomy process of journeying towards the dark. But there are some quite other ways of envisaging what it means to die, as this resonant quotation from a sermon by John Donne in the seventeenth century makes clear. It has been shaped into a prayer that is often used in contemporary funeral services, and it dwells on the prospect of 'our last awakening'. Donne's prayer displays a conviction about the reality of death, not as personal annihilation or as a time of fearful pain or judgement, but the opportunity to awake into a kind of life that is unimaginably more glorious than the dearly loved life we already know. There is a wonderful sense of balance, equality and self-possession in the way Donne envisages the life of heaven.

No doubt Donne was referring to the general resurrection that he believed would take place for all humanity, after their last sleep

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of earthly death. But I think the phrase 'our last awakening' can also helpfully be applied to the insight and enlightenment that can accompany a willingness to contemplate with an open heart the mortality that we all share, whatever our beliefs about the hereafter. In our own age, Christians may feel as uncertain as anyone else about what that means, or whether it even exists.

Why is poetry helpful in exploring our mortality?

It is frequently said that our modern culture is unwilling to talk or to reflect about death, but in fact poets both ancient and modern, and both Christian and non-Christian, do explore aspects of our mortality in a great deal of depth and detail. I believe there are a number of reasons why poetry is deeply helpful in addressing a subject that concerns us all but which we might usually try to avoid.

- *It is not all morbid and gloomy*. You will find in this book poems with a huge range of tone, from joyful and ecstatic to gentle, ironic, despairing, and even hilarious. Facing death, accompanying the dying, celebrating those who have died, and articulating hope about what lies beyond involves us in experiencing the whole range of human emotions about what it means to live, and to love and be loved.
- *Poets are good at noticing key details*. There is something deeply comforting for those dealing with a terminal diagnosis or suffering acute bereavement in discovering that someone else has been through the experience and observed the particular, unexpected thoughts, insights and feelings that can arise at these times. And for those who have not experienced these things, it can reduce fear to discover that there may be unexpected blessings ahead of us: new perspectives on life, an appreciation of the importance of people not previously noticed, the awareness of our own resilience or a heightened awareness of how precious the earth is.
- *Poets give us permission to name and acknowledge feelings we may be ashamed of*. Grief is often discovered to consist of a range and mixture of very different feelings, and not just dignified sadness or pain as we might imagine. Anger, fear, denial, numbness, gruesome fantasy: all may need to be recognized and named before acceptance

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is possible. It is helpful to have these things articulated, and not just the truths we wish we believed.

- *Poems are short, but work at lots of levels*. There is something very manageable about the size and shape of a short poem, particularly when we have neither time nor patience to reflect on rational arguments. They tend to be concrete in their observations of the landscape of mortality and grief, and they have a distinct shape and rhythm that gives something firm for the reader to lay hold on. At the same time, they normally work at several different levels. They are able to embrace the paradoxes that are a feature of the terrain, and to hold together different tracks of reality that may be experienced simultaneously. And they may have different insights to offer at different stages of life.

Using this book

It is unlikely that you will want to read this book quickly, or necessarily in the order that the poems are set out (which is also the order in which the commentaries were written). It could be used as a Lent book, reading one poem and commentary a day. But it is more likely to be helpful as something to browse and dip into according to interest or need, depending on where you are in your life and which aspects of reflecting on mortality are most salient for you just now.

The tone and the approach of the poems selected are very varied, and they have been grouped into six broad sections, which explore different feelings about mortality, and different stages of fear, grief, acceptance, celebration and hope.

Ordinary mortality

It is one of the chief conditions under which we live on this earth that our lives are not for ever. This is a fact that connects us with the whole of creation. The cycle of birth, growth, blossoming, ripeness, decay and death is ubiquitous and necessary. It is all right, and we should live recognizing this and making choices that take the ordinariness of our mortality into account. Not to do so, especially as we grow older, is to live in denial and unreality.

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Fears and fantasies

We are the only creatures who can foresee our own deaths, even when we are currently perfectly well. We are naturally curious about something about which we can know nothing whatever for certain. We entertain fears, even if we believe that there is nothing the other side of death. We indulge in fantasies about how it might actually feel to die, how brave we will be and how others will be affected by our deaths; and we use the knowledge of our shared mortality to try and persuade others to love us better now.

Actual crisis

The news that we are actually facing a life-threatening situation, or the experience of accompanying others who are in fact on their deathbeds, both feel quite different from our fantasies entertained while no actual crisis exists. New insights and reflections arise. An austere kind of blessing can become available at this point of crisis, which we cannot find elsewhere.

Immediate grief

The bereaved find themselves suddenly in a state that afflicts the living survivors in a complex and visceral way, which has to be worked through over time as they deal with the irreversible fact of their loved one's death. They are often surprised to find that grief consists of a whole range of emotions that wash over them unpredictably. These can include a feeling of numbness or insubstantiality, sadness, boredom, deep anger, guilt and physical pain. They may wish to talk endlessly of the dead, and may have convincing fantasies or dreams that the person has come back to life. There are immediate administrative and ritual tasks to be accomplished, and a whole new range of people who accompany them at this time.

Remembering and celebrating

Initially the memories of those who have died are around the actual death, but gradually the earlier memories of a fully lived life can emerge,

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and a rounded, poignant sense of the individual who is remembered. In thinking about actual people who have lived and died on this earth, whether we knew them personally or not, it becomes easier to access a sense of wholeness and meaning to the shape of human existence, and celebrate our place in the unending sequence of living and dying.

Hope

Christians have the hope and promise of a life with God that embraces us beyond death as well as during this life on earth. However, we have very little further information about this, and Christians are not exempt from fears, fantasies and speculation about our own deaths, or from the normal sequence of grief reactions that afflict bereaved human beings generally. The hope that we hold is based on the conviction that God in Christ shared our human lives up to and including the experience of death, and yet was raised in power on the third day. Thus we have the assurance that the sting of death and the victory of the grave (however powerful from an earthly perspective) have been overcome. The God who brought us to birth and has supported us through the joys and vicissitudes of life will also embrace us in death. This conviction may enable us to surrender ourselves to the one who holds our whole story – our unremembered beginning and our unforeseeable end – and will always defend and befriend us:

Before the beginning thou hast foreknown the end,
Before the birthday the death-bed was seen of thee:
Cleanse what I cannot cleanse, mend what I cannot mend,
O Lord, All-Merciful, be merciful to me.

While the end is drawing near I know not mine end;
Birth I recall not, my death I cannot foresee:
O God, arise to defend, arise to befriend,
O Lord All-Merciful, be merciful to me.

Christina Rossetti

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ORDINARY MORTALITY

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Fern Hill

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,
  The night above the dingle starry,
    Time let me hail and climb
  Golden in the heydays of his eyes,
And honoured among wagons I was prince of the apple towns
And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves
    Trail with daisies and barley
  Down the rivers of the windfall light.

And as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns
About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home,
  In the sun that is young once only,
    Time let me play and be
  Golden in the mercy of his means,
And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves
Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold,
    And the sabbath rang slowly
  In the pebbles of the holy streams.

All the sun long it was running, it was lovely, the hay
Fields high as the house, the tunes from the chimneys, it was air
  And playing, lovely and watery
    And fire green as grass.
  And nightly under the simple stars
As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away,
All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables, the nightjars
  Flying with the ricks, and the horses
    Flashing into the dark.

And then to awake, and the farm, like a wanderer white
With the dew, come back, the cock on his shoulder: it was all
  Shining, it was Adam and maiden,
    The sky gathered again
  And the sun grew round that very day,
So it must have been after the birth of the simple light
In the first, spinning place, the spellbound horses walking warm
  Out of the whinnying green stable
    On to the fields of praise.

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And honoured among foxes and pheasants by the gay house
Under the new made clouds and happy as the heart was long,
  In the sun born over and over,
    I ran my heedless ways,
  My wishes raced through the house high hay,
And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that time allows
In all his tuneful turning so few and such morning songs
  Before the children green and golden
    Follow him out of grace,

Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days, that time would take me
Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand,
  In the moon that is always rising,
    Nor that riding to sleep
  I should hear him fly with the high fields
And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land.
Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,
    Time held me green and dying
  Though I sang in my chains like the sea.

Dylan Thomas

It may seem strange to begin a book about dying with a poem that is full of the exuberance of life, specifically the energetic life and play of a young child. But perhaps the necessary task of accepting our ordinary human mortality is best approached not through fear or despair, but everyday joy.

Dylan Thomas' poetry almost demands to be read out loud. When we do this, some of the liberties he takes with words (he has been described as drunk with language) begin to make sense: the strange adjectives, the grammar that doesn't quite resolve itself, the echoes of familiar phrases that have been adapted for new use. In 'Fern Hill', this quirky language seems brilliantly applied, since it is almost as if a young child is experimenting with language, as with everything else in his play-world, lord of all he surveys.

Thomas was brought up in Swansea, but his city life was balanced with summers spent with his aunt at the farm in Carmarthenshire where the poem is set. This may explain why the boy's rural experience is recalled as everlasting summer and freedom to play. It is as if there are no chills or shadows in this Edenic place, where the skies are clear and all of creation, animals, fruits and harvest seem to be part

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of the child's dominion of imaginative play. Yet the poem is saved from cloying nostalgia precisely because of the reader's awareness that childhood passes, and because the echoes of Eden themselves suggest what happened there in the biblical account: the fall from innocence, the beginning of shame, the entry of painfully hard work, the certainty of death (Genesis 3).

The poet captures the perspective of childhood in a variety of ways, which remind us that this is not how adults see the world. There is a repeated metaphor of the hayfields which are as 'high as the house', for a child running through the grown crop can hardly see the house beside it, while an adult would see the whole landscape. Various phrases recur that are redolent of the clichés of children's books, but subtly altered. Instead of 'happy as the day was long' we have 'happy as the grass was green', 'singing as the farm was home', 'happy as the heart was long'. For a period of time, it is as if these things were true; the child was temporarily wholeheartedly located in the happy narratives that adults recount to children – the hero of his own triumphant stories.

The narrator is seemingly re-entering his own childhood play, with its exact combination of a glorious delight in the ordinary features of the natural world, and a sense of personal dominion untrammelled by adult knowledge, desires or responsibilities. He is 'prince of the apple towns', he 'lordly' wreathes the trees with trails of daisy chains, he imagines himself a hunter, or a magnificent rider, 'honoured among wagons'. He feels like Adam, the first created man, present at the birth of creation's light, orchestrating worship of God as he lets out the whinnying horses 'On to the fields of praise'. Night and day celebrate with him 'All the sun long' and 'All the moon long'.

But there is another strand that underlies this exuberance. The metaphor of greenness pervades the poem, sometimes intermingled with gold – again that sense of perpetual sunshine so often recalled by children, and not by their accompanying adults. In Thomas' work, greenness represents the life-force, the fuse of youthfulness, energy and vitality that brings growth and fertility. Yet 'green' also conveys the suggestion of naivety, oblivious to the cynicism, pain, disappointment, guilt and failure (including the failure to be a hero) that will come with adulthood.

And then there is the figure of time itself, that (in spite of the child's sense of his own dominion) is actually in control throughout

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the poem. It begins by letting the child 'play and be/ Golden', but moves on remorselessly to the point where childhood is imperceptibly lost, as the 'children green and golden/ Follow him out of grace'. At one level there is a gentleness implied by the child's right to this time of blissful and careless unawareness, 'young and easy in the mercy of his means'; but at another we are reminded how we are permitted only 'so few and such morning songs' in this life.

But this is the deal. From the time we are born we are also on the way to our deaths. Even as a child 'Time held me green and dying' (notice the precise choice of that word 'held', which can imply both comfort and bondage). But this ordinary mortality, poignant and limited as it is, is also glorious and can be accepted and inhabited with childlike joy. We share the bonds of creation, but we too can choose to sing in our 'chains like the sea'.

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In the Fields

Lord, when I look at lovely things which pass,
  Under old trees the shadows of young leaves
Dancing to please the wind along the grass,
  Or the gold stillness of the August sun on the August sheaves;
Can I believe there is a heavenlier world than this?
  And if there is
Will the strange heart of any everlasting thing
  Bring me these dreams that take my breath away?
They come at evening with the home-flying rooks and the scent of hay,
  Over the fields. They come in Spring.

Charlotte Mew

It is not, of course, only human childhood that passes quickly. The conditions of change – new growth, maturity, ripeness, ageing and death – are all around us in the natural world and the passing of the seasons. No moment of beauty is static or possible to capture; there is only a brief opportunity to gaze at 'lovely things which pass'.

It is hard to write in an original way about the beauties of nature, and the poet has chosen a few select details to focus on. Concentrating on the wind in the trees, she has, instead of looking upwards, directed our gaze downwards to the shadows of the leaves, which appear to be flickering and dancing across the grass. With very few words she highlights the temporary and yet recurring nature of the scene's beauty (the trees are old, the leaves are new; this will happen repeatedly). And she implies a sort of loving playfulness between the elements of the scene by personifying them. It is as if the leaves are 'Dancing to please' the wind-blown grass beneath them. The next line chooses another detail of the changing face of the landscape: 'the gold stillness of the August sun on the August sheaves'. Here the wind has dropped; the harvest is cut; the moment of ripeness has been achieved and it almost seems as if time itself has stopped in the golden heat. The repetition of the word 'August' in one short line implies this – and yet, of course, it also reminds us that September and the cool rains will come. It is lovely, but it is not for ever.

This brief poem's central question comes next: 'Can I believe there is a heavenlier world than this?' After the pictures just painted, this

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