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August 4, 2019

*Call them what you will, the sacred gifts of being human.*

### *When Evening Comes*

God turned up the other night. Or whatever *you* call what you can't find words for. Whatever you call moments that fill you with a spaciousness you hope lasts forever.

The tide had come all the way in, and the breeze was soft. Crickets chirped as the sun slowly sank lower in the sky. When it finally slipped over the horizon, the pinks and golds reflected in the water began softening to blue and gray and purple – a continuously evolving canvas. The still timelessness of twilight set in, night still a long ways off. It would stay light for hours. This time of year invites us to appreciate the evening.

Out in the water, the neighborhood kids had been horsing around for hours, jumping off a dock, pushing each other off the dock, tipping over the dock, shrieking in delight. When we went inside after a while for some supper, their happy sounds magnified our contentment. The minutes stretched out. At some point, someone observed that the kids were now out of the water and hanging out on the street, talking and laughing softly. We remembered staying out late in the neighborhood back when – a gentle reminder of the passage of time.

Our little meal long over, our host started moving around the kitchen, getting out more dishes and pulling things out of the fridge. “What are you doing?” asked his wife. He had an impromptu dessert in mind. Anything was possible this long summer evening.

I suppose there was some nostalgia in the air. Someone might have said, “Hey, we're not the kids anymore, are we? We're the old folks who've seen a lot of sunsets. Who knows how many more we have left?” I suppose that going there could have changed the mood, got us ruminating about the evening of our own lives – aware that the end of life was closer now than the beginning.

On another night, that might have brought on sadness or maybe dread. But life that evening was too dear to feel anything but gladness. We may not have been swimming for hours, then playing on the street, but life – all of a piece – felt beautiful and abundant, the children out there good company. And the light was magical.

Reflecting on this evening of evenings brings to mind to a beloved houseplant from my childhood, the night-blooming cereus. You may know it – a Central American cactus that produces extraordinary fragrant blossoms the size of a child's head. Nocturnal plants like this are active after the sunset to attract nocturnal pollinators like bats and moths that typically sleep during the day. The night-blooming cereus blooms only once a year, as if it stores up all the beauty it can muster for that one night. And you don't know just when it will happen. About two weeks from when you first see its tiny beginnings, the bud – now as big as your hand – has grown fat and tipped up toward the light, enclosed in long pink and white tendrils.

The rest of the year, this plant is plain and gangly. Once, when we were moving and selling our house, an advisor recommended that we get rid of it – “an eyesore,” she said.

The best part of the night-blooming cereus is that the blooming happens before your eyes in the course of a summer evening. The tips start to flick outward just as the sun goes down. Soon you can peer inside and see an intricate world, with dozens of yellow stamen surrounding a spidery white stigma. Completely open by dark, the pink tendrils opening back onto themselves, the white blossom lives until sunrise when it collapses and dies. A heart breaker that fills you with joy.

A family tradition in my house is to invite everyone over the evening this plant blooms. The invitation has to be tentative until about 7 p.m. when it’s finally clear that tonight’s the night. Forty-five people came one year. A great blooming year –17 blossoms over three days. We partied the whole time. Afterward, a friend wrote this note:

I wanted to say thank you for inviting me to your flowering. It was such an amazing thing to witness, and I was happy that I had the time on a summer evening to sit and watch a flower bloom and know that was the best place in the world I could possibly be. It was great to see you and also to [be] back together on another journey this time to the secret world of plant pollination....the Cereus proved to me that beautiful things are worth the wait and so I continue waiting.

Things that happen in the evening are called vespertine. The night-blooming cereus is a vespertine species. From Latin *vespertinus*: “evening.” Vespers (from the same root) is a time of evening prayer in the Christian tradition. The earliest Christian writings, before the 4<sup>th</sup> century, refer to Vespers as when all the candles and torches in a church would be lit, creating “an infinite light.” Vespers, along with Vigils, is thought by some to be the most ancient Church service.<sup>1</sup>

Evening is also revered in the Orthodox, Jewish and Muslim faiths, where evening begins the day, starting at sunset. Some Sufis (of Islam) interpret the five daily prayers as symbolizing the cycles of creation. The first prayer of the morning represents the return to life, while the evening prayer, called Maghrib, represents the existential state “of leaving existence.”<sup>2</sup>

We too might well consider evening a time of reflection. Day is done. Darkness will soon fall. Evening this time of year invites into an in-between place. Depending on our circumstances, it can feel peaceful or hard, perhaps euphoric. Writer Rabbi Yaakov Paley calls evening a...

...divine vision, wordless but potent, available to all who care to raise their eyes...not identical on any two evenings. To each person...the message differs.

To mourners returning from burying their beloved, it may convey comfort; it may weep with them, or perhaps signal the splendor of a blissfully soaring soul. To newlyweds

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15381a.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Vincent J. Cornell, *Voices of the Spirit*, Volume 2, p. 20.

dancing their way from under a wedding canopy, it may inspire further enchantment, blessings, hope and affection. It may impart a delighted smile to the goodhearted person extending his hand to assist the less fortunate. It inspires the artist and the imaginative. A busy merchant may pause in his tracks and recall the Source of all blessing. It extends a ray of encouragement to the depressed. It may make an atheist wonder. The mind of the arrogant tyrant may flicker with a brief recognition of fleeting insignificance. The oppressed may be reminded of a supernal Eye that witnesses injustice and plans glorious salvations.

No one can behold the birth of [evening] and not recall the Creator.<sup>3</sup>

Maybe it was the music of the kids outside that contributed the other night to a feeling of well-being. Maybe it was a sense of feeling held in a stillness outside of time, a nearness to something I don't have words for, the air soft, the light glowing.

I pay attention when I don't have words for something, especially when it lingers like this. Which is why the word God came to mind in the days that followed. There was a time I bristled at that word and the powers, traits and doctrines humans have given this invention of ours. In seminary, I delighted in learning that the ancients of Israel would never even say the word G-d. No mere human utterance, after all, could ever approach the greatness, the beauty, the power, the mystery of the divine.

That no words can describe some things made sense to me. We know what it's like when the beauty of the world leaves us speechless. Or when its power – in a storm, a lightening strike, a roiling, boiling ocean – leaves us speechless. We know what it's like to have no words in precious moments with each other or even in witnessing – as we have this morning<sup>4</sup> – what strangers are going through. There are times we can only behold.

The other day, the most familiar, everyday thing – evening! – woke me up. And left me changed – as if I'd fallen in love. Filled up with excitement. Woke! Distracted. And a little grasping – when would it happen again? I did the math (68.75 years x 365 days/yr) and marveled that it took 25,000 evenings for me to see it.

It was more than a nice time with friends. More like a felt sense that's here to stay, like a great dream. Who has flying dreams? They can have this accessible, you-can-call-it-back quality.

That this powerful experience of evening eventually called up the word “God” surprised me. But how else to refer to something ineffable, hard to describe, good and powerful that brings up a beautiful awe and reverence? With brain science? Talk of neuro-transmitters? Nah. I'd rather ride this wave of wonder and pray that I remember it.

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<sup>3</sup> Yaakov Paley, “Good Evening!” at [https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/1737732/jewish/Good-Evening.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1737732/jewish/Good-Evening.htm)

<sup>4</sup> Awaking to the horrific news of the Dayton shooting, on the heels of the El Paso shooting last night.

In her poem “Varanasi,” Mary Oliver describes a ritual in the Ganges River:

A woman was standing in the river up to her waist;  
she was lifting handfuls of water and spilling it  
over her body, slowly and many times,

as if until there came some moment  
of inner satisfaction between her own life and the river’s....

I can’t say much more except that it all happened  
in silence and peaceful simplicity, and something that felt  
like the bliss of a certainty and a life lived  
in accordance with that certainty.

I must remember this, I thought, as we fly back  
to America.

Pray God I remember this.

Call them what you will, the sacred gifts of being human. And receive the gift of the summer evening – however it speaks to you – with awe and with praise. Amen.

**Reading:** “Let Evening Come” by Jane Kenyon

Let the light of late afternoon  
shine through chinks in the barn, moving  
up the bales as the sun moves down.

Let the cricket take up chafing  
as a woman takes up her needles  
and her yarn. Let evening come.

Let dew collect on the hoe abandoned  
in long grass. Let the stars appear  
and the moon disclose her silver horn.

Let the fox go back to its sandy den.  
Let the wind die down. Let the shed  
go black inside. Let evening come.

To the bottle in the ditch, to the scoop  
in the oats, to air in the lung  
let evening come.

Let it come, as it will, and don't  
be afraid. God does not leave us  
comfortless, so let evening come.