

## Notice the Rose

by Rev. Art Lester

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Among the many things I remember about the sixties, a few things stand out. One of these was a small article in the New York Times about an aeroplane crash. It seems that a small commuter flight exploded soon after takeoff from the airport. Everyone on board was killed instantly, except for a young boy, who fell burning several thousand feet out of the sky and landed in a snow bank. He lived for a while, I don't know how long, but what stayed in my mind was what he was reported to have said when the rescuers dug him out. He said, "It was beautiful, New York in the snow."

Those lines have haunted me all these years. A small cinder, falling out of the sky, tumbling, perhaps blazing, through the air, sees a landscape like no other—the smoking beast of the city made glorious by the snow. That is what he has to say when the ambulance staff reaches him, not "Oh, my God, I think my back is broken," or "Am I going to die?" or any of a host of questions you might expect. What he does is utter a poem, some words forged in a deep part of himself, that cut through the details of the event to some truth we can hardly imagine.

As with any appearance of the extraordinary, his words can be explained away. He was raving in shock, the poor thing, didn't know what he was saying. Off his head. And that explanation is strangely comforting, heard from our position on the earth, where words born in the sky threaten to confuse us. Thank goodness, it could not have been that-- knowing his control over life and health was well out of his hands-- the boy saw with fresh eyes through the veil of mere events to something extraordinary that underlies them. Thank goodness, we say. And yet... and yet his words linger, inerasably.

Perhaps this would not be so intriguing if we didn't already have some hint of where the boy's words came from. It could be that his statement reminds us of something that we don't often become aware of. It stimulates a half-hidden memory of a point of view that sees through the obvious to the profound, an "us" that is more than just a coping, reacting agent in a flat and ordinary world.

This “us” that sometimes comes alive in moments of insight, and points to a deeper way of regarding life. The ancient “us” that knows that, in some sense, we are always falling flaming out of the sky. This “us” that—dare we say it?—might be who we really are.

I had hoped to be able to reproduce a painting for you this morning, but my grasp of technology just isn't up to the task. It's called “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus,” by Pieter Breugel. Perhaps you know it. It shows a view from a high hill where one of those chunky Flemish figures, a ploughman, is following his horse through the furrows. Below him is a shepherd, leaning on his staff, gazing, as shepherds often do, at the hills. Below, the bay is full of boats, with fishermen and a larger vessel with high sails. Just at the far right, you can see a startling thing: a pair of legs floating limply in the water.

The scene is based on the story, told by Ovid, of the attempt of human beings to fly. Icarus makes a pair of wings out of feathers, stuck onto a frame with candle wax. His father, Daedalus, is in on it too. He warns the boy not to fly too high, but Icarus ignores him, and, nearing the heat of the sun, the wax melts. Icarus falls to his death. This is a cautionary tale about the limits of human aspiration, and you would think that the artist might have made a dramatic point of this, rather than allow the fallen Icarus only an inch of canvas.

But that, of course, is the painting's genius. It has the same odd quality that Tom Stoppard created when he took two extras from Hamlet and made Rosencrantz and Guildenstern into the main characters in their own play. The poet W.H. Auden treated Brueghel's painting in one of my favourite poems. Here it is, “Musée des Beaux Arts”:

*About suffering they were never wrong,  
The Old Masters; how well, they understood  
Its human position; how it takes place  
While someone else is eating or opening a window or  
just walking dully along;  
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately  
waiting  
For the miraculous birth, there always must be  
Children who did not specially want it to happen,  
skating*

*On a pond at the edge of the wood:  
They never forgot  
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course  
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot  
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the  
torturer's horse  
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.  
In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns  
away  
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may  
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,  
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun  
shone  
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the  
green  
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have  
seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.*

Auden wants us to know what Breugel had already intuited: that each of us is always the central character in a very important story, full of deep plot and high intrigue, but that each of us is also an extra on the edge of the picture. We are enmeshed in story, held in role like actors on stage, but, meanwhile, as they say, life goes on.

What remains of the mythic attempt on the heavens is just a pair of white legs against the green water. We do not know what thoughts Icarus had as he plunged toward the sea. Perhaps if his father had arrived sooner, he might have heard him say something like the words of the flaming child, "It was beautiful, the bay." Perhaps Icarus, falling, saw through his own story to the truth beneath. We can leave these speculations on one side, because one day we will have news of our own to relate of our own descent.

I have seen a few things in hospital wards and other extreme places that make me wonder. When some people get near death, something happens to them. Even though they may, even a few minutes before, have been full of fear and anger—because, yes, hospitals can be angry places, too—a certain shift in viewpoint seems to occur. It is almost as if Breugel or Stoppard are doing a

revision of the script; people leave behind their stories and gaze directly at things.

Here's a confession: I always used to hate flowers in hospitals. I used to hate the kiosk, usually staffed by kindly and worthy volunteers, where bouquets are bought, I hated the plastic film wrapped around the bunch. I hated carrying them into a room, where a perhaps exhausted patient would have to organise a vase. There is nothing wrong with these flowers, of course. They can be lovely. I think what I hated was the symbolism: "Look, I'm sorry I have nothing meaningful to tell you, so I brought you these flowers." There, I've confessed. But if I visit you one day and bring you flowers, please don't hold it against me; I mean well. And if you bring me some, well that's all right, too. Because I've changed my mind. I'll tell you why:

A member of mine at the Kensington church where I used to minister contracted a terminal disease after a lifetime of hearty, almost rambunctious good health. After a long time of fending off the inevitable—always saying cheerfully in answer to a question about her health, "I'm on the mend, getting better every day."—the day came when she could no longer deal with her illness with brave denial. When I heard, I went to see her.

She was always the glamorous lady of a certain age, Rosalie. I later learned that she had had the hairdresser come to prepare her for what turned out to be my final visit. She was as warm as always. The nurse found a vase for the mixed flowers I had brought. But as we talked, I realised that her attention was elsewhere. Fearing that I was exhausting her even further, I rose to leave. She asked me to place the flowers on her bedside table. A pink rose was in the centre of the bunch, and I saw as I left that she seemed to be concentrating her attention on it. At the door she said, "Thank you for the flowers." And seemed to mean it.

Sometimes when people are really ill, when they are near the end of their personal stories, flowers do something very interesting. I have found that when you get near the point of abandoning your story, you learn to see. Life stripped of its intrigue and complications is very basic and pure. You may want to keep the juggling balls of their story in the air, paint them into the foreground of a picture, but they want to simply be. It is then that they seem to notice the rose in the vase.

Do you know what I mean, “notice the rose?” We can buy roses by the dozen and set them in vases. We can grow them and have hundreds of blooms outside our windows. We can talk here for hours about the symbolism of roses, their connection to the Virgin Mary, the warring factions for which they stood in England a few centuries ago. We can quote Shakespeare and Omar Khyyam and a dozen folk songs that have roses intertwined with hawthorn on the graves of star-crossed lovers. We can speak eloquently about the thorns that accompany beauty. We can fill the room with roses and still not notice them.

I think that a rose, like a snow-covered landscape, is best seen by the falling. Icarus had a wonderful view of the bay, something the earnest ploughman ignores because he is wrapped up in his story of work and reward. The terminally ill patient may see what to me were just a few tokens of my uncomfortable silence, see them as I cannot, because my point of view, as Gerard Manley Hopkins says, is “mired in toil.” I am wrapped in my story, and it has made me blind.

I think the message of the falling boys may be a clue for how to live. If we can conceive of our lives as stories drawing to an end, become aware of just how truly we are falling too, we may learn to see. Icarus and the boy in the snow bank had seconds; we may have years. But we are falling just as certainly as they were.

We began to fall the minute we drew our first breath. But whenever this occurred to us, we drove the thought away with the all-too-human mantra: “Not yet, not yet.” And being enrapt in the illusion of weightlessness, we learned to deaden our awareness with the chatter of our restless minds. In so doing, we forfeited what was always our birthright: the clearest view on offer.

The great heroes of consciousness—Jesus, Buddha, the Sufi masters—knew that they were falling, that we were all falling. There is a Zen story that tells of a man who has fallen from a high cliff. In desperation, he reaches out and grabs a fragile root projecting from the sheer rock face. Below him is a rushing river and sharp rocks. There are no handholds other than the root he is clutching, and he can feel the root beginning to tear loose. He notices a small plant an arm’s length away, from which is growing a single dark berry. He reaches and puts it into his mouth.

Hanging there, minutes or seconds from certain death, he says, "Ahhhh, how sweet!"

If we have missed the sweetness of the berry, or the sight of the snowy landscape, we may have missed something more important than simple aesthetics. We may have failed to notice some clue that would make sense of our presence here, some overlooked piece of the puzzle without which we have merely existed. It may be that that single element contains our redemption, the lost lane end into heaven.

On our own descent we may realise this irony. In those compressed seconds or minutes or years, or even now, this ordinary morning, we may realise that we have always lived, are always living in mid-air. We may find that though our minds insist on plot and twists in the tale, that we have always lived in that elusive moment called the Eternal Now. And in that precise moment the tangled thread of our lives may reveal itself as a design of great meaning and beauty. We may find that God is not so much hidden as simply ignored. We may finally notice the rose.