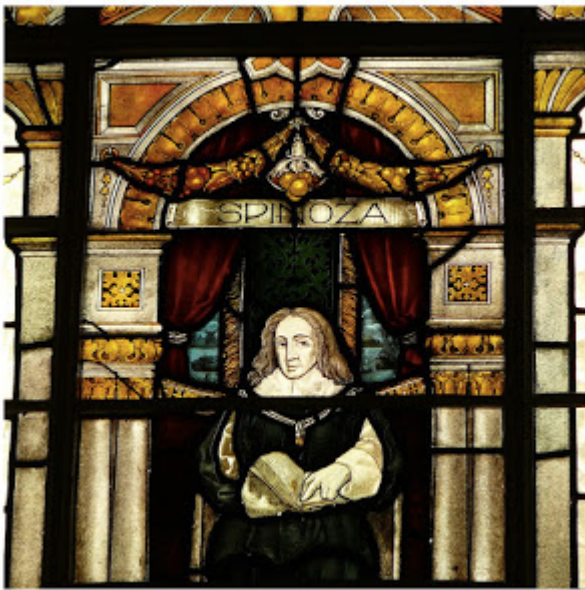


OUR GIFT OF LIFE IN CONTEXT SEE, A PEARL OF GRACE IN ETERNITY—AN ADDRESS IN PREPARATION FOR THE NEW YEAR 2020

Posted on December 29, 2019 by Andrew Brown



[Spinoza in a window of George's Meeting House \(Unitarian\), Exeter](#)

READINGS

Psalm 74:16-17

The day is thine, the night also is thine: thou hast prepared the light and the sun. Thou hast set all the borders of the earth: thou hast made summer and winter.

Night and Death (1828)

by [Joseph Blanco White \(1775–1841\)](#)

MYSTERIOUS Night! when our first Parent knew

*Thee, from report divine, and heard thy name,
Did he not tremble for this lovely Frame,
This glorious canopy of Light and Blue?
Yet 'neath a curtain of translucent dew,
Bathed in the rays of the great setting Flame,
Hesperus with the Host of Heaven came,
And lo! Creation widened on Man's view.
Who could have thought such Darkness lay concealed
Within thy beams, O Sun! or who could find,
Whilst flower, and leaf, and insect stood revealed,
That to such countless Orbs thou mad'st us blind!
Why do we then shun Death with anxious strife?
If Light can thus deceive, wherefore not Life?*

'New every morning is the love' from the longer poem 'Hues of the Rich Unfolding Morn', in 'The Christian Year' (1827) by [John Keble \(1792–1896\)](#)

*New every morning is the love
our wakening and uprising prove;
through sleep and darkness safely brought,
restored to life and power and thought.*

*New mercies, each returning day,
hover around us while we pray;
new perils past, new sins forgiven,
new thoughts of God, new hopes of heaven.*

If on our daily course our mind

*be set to hallow all we find,
new treasures still, of countless price,
God will provide for sacrifice.*

*The trivial round, the common task,
will furnish all we need to ask,
room to deny ourselves, a road
to bring us daily nearer God.*

*Only, O Lord, in thy dear love
fit us for perfect rest above;
and help us, this and every day,
to live more nearly as we pray.*

'Night's velvet black and deepest blue' by Celia James

*Night's velvet black and deepest blue
Gently translate to pearly hue,
Stars fade in each dawn's gathering light,
Maintain their dance beyond our sight.*

*The sun emerges limpid red
To craft its passage overhead;
Its arc defines each unique day
And Time's our measure of its sway.*

*Time's never still; across the World
The present moment is unfurled.
That's what we have, the chance to make*

Each moment matter, for Truth's sake.

When Night returns and we rehearse

The wonder of the Universe,

Our gift of Life in context see,

A pearl of Grace in Eternity.

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ADDRESS

Our gift of Life in context see, a pearl of Grace in Eternity—An address in preparation for the New Year 2020

Back in October, Celia (James) mentioned that she'd written a hymn to the tune [*Melcombe*](#) which, in most mainstream churches, accompanies John Keble's famous lyric 'New every morning is the love / our wakening and uprising prove'. I asked Celia if I could read it and, after thinking about it for a little while, she very kindly sent it to me. On reading it I found it to be a splendid, lovely lyric and so I asked permission for us to sing it at some point. As today's service has revealed, she said, yes. Thank you, Celia.

However, as is sometimes the way with these things life intervened and I didn't get round properly to thinking about when to sing it until, two weeks ago, it struck me as being a appropriate lyric to sing on this last Sunday of the Old Year just as we have passed through the mid-point of the year's own night time with it's distinctive velvet blacks and deepest blues and when, as the spring begins imperceptibly to approach, we begin to prepare ourselves for a time when the dark gently will translate to pearly hue.

With this thought in mind it seemed important to begin my reflections by returning to Keble's original lyric, not least of all because its way of talking about the translation from night to day had prompted Celia to write her alternative lyric in response.

As I read Keble's original for the what must have been the first time since I was a choirboy in my local parish church some forty years ago, I was powerfully struck by how Keble's images of revelation and nearness to God so depended on us being willing to sacrifice our relationship with this natural world — a world perceived as being dark and sinful — in order that we might awake to some bright new dawn breaking over some promised and hoped for new heaven and new earth. Keble clearly thought we could only be brought to this other world by moving through our world's 'sleep and darkness', only such a movement from dark to light would be able to restore to

us 'life and power and thought'. This revelatory movement from dark to light requires us — in what Keble disparagingly calls our 'trivial round' and 'common task' — simply to use the things of this dark world as tools to create 'room to **deny** ourselves'. Only such an act of disciplined disconnection with, and denial of, this world could, he believed, set us on 'a road to bring us daily nearer God.'

Celia's poem on the other hand reminds us to see that not only the light but to reveal things to us but so, too, does the dark.

It was this insight that reminded me of another lyric written by the Spanish theologian and poet José María Blanco y Crespo (1775–1841) (Joseph Blanco White) only a year after the publication of Keble's poem, and in the same city of Oxford.

White was by this time already well on his way out of the Catholic Church (he'd become a Catholic priest in Spain) and on a journey that, via the Anglican communion would eventually take him into Unitarian circles. In other words his theological reflections were no longer pointing him in anything like the direction towards which the Anglo-Catholic Keble was pointing. Now I simply don't know whether this is true or not but this week I have come to wonder if White's poem might be taken as being some sort of response to Keble's Anglo-Catholic rather black and white view of light/darkness?

In any case, the striking thing for me — especially when the two poems were unexpectedly juxtaposed in my thoughts thanks to the prompting of Celia's poem — is that whereas for Keble light reveals and darkness simply obscures, for White darkness is equally able to reveal amazing things to us, i.e. those things which light all too easily obscures — for example the 'countless Orbs' that are the stars at night. For White, therefore, the fullest kind of life and revelation available to human kind relies upon us being embedded in and fully open to the cyclical natural processes in which light follows dark, and dark follows light, endlessly. For White both darkness and light are to be valued as offering us insights which serve to bring us nearer to the divine, nearer to God.

Celia's lyric, it seems to me, sings and eloquent set of modern variations on this same theme. It's a lyric that doesn't make the mistake of yearning for entry into another, supernatural world of pure light and no darkness but a nuanced and rich natural one that's constantly dancing as it flows, folds and fields. The lyric presents us with a world in which night constantly flows into and informs the day, in which the day constantly flows into and informs the night, a world in which stars are revealed and then obscured by the endless arcs of all material things — including time — right down into to the microcosmic world of sub-atomic particles and right up to the largest imaginable macrocosmic objects. This is a world in which, thanks to the gift of reason ('the only oracle given you by heaven' — Jefferson) even when we cannot physically see these

flows and arcs in motion our minds are still capable of understanding that all things everywhere always-already ‘maintain their dance beyond our sight.’

As Celia’s lyric notes ‘Time’s never still; across the World / The present moment is unfurled’ and it is only by a conscious participation in these unfurling dances — as both artists and scientists — that we are able properly to measure things and it is this kind of participatory (yet also reflective) measuring that can offer us ‘a road to bring us daily nearer God’ unimagined by Keble the theist.

Celia puts it this way:

When Night returns and we rehearse

The wonder of the Universe,

Our gift of Life in context see,

A pearl of Grace in Eternity.

It seems to me that a rehearsal of the wonder of an always-already dancing, unfurling, natural universe can prompt some of us to see ‘a pearl of Grace in Eternity’, namely, the world under what Spinoza called ‘the aspect of eternity’ (*sub specie aeternitatis*). In rather more straightforward language we may say that Spinoza thought it was possible for us to understand the world and our place in it as if ‘from the perspective of the eternal’.

Seeing ‘our gift of Life’ in this total context helps us see the only kind of immortality, that is to say nearness to God that has ever made any sense to me.

What I mean by this can, perhaps, best be illustrated by the words by the Spanish-American philosopher [George Santayana](#)’s which speak of Spinoza’s conception of eternity and which I nearly always use at funerals conducted in this church:

*When a man’s (or woman’s) life is over, it remains true that he has lived; it remains true that he has been one sort of man and not another. In the infinite mosaic of history that bit has its unfading and its perpetual function and effect. A man who understands himself under the form of eternity knows the quality that eternally belongs to him, and knows that he cannot wholly die, even if he would; for when the moment of his life is over, the truth of his life remains. The fact of him is part forever in the infinite context of facts [or, as I say in a funeral, ‘existence’] (George Santayana from his preface to *Spinoza’s Ethics*, J. M. Dent and Sons, 1910).*

For Spinoza, to see our life in this context — to see the world under the form of eternity — was also to have knowledge of nothing less than God. But this is not to have knowledge of a theistic, creator God who stands outside the universe in another world as God did for Keble (and the

psalmist) but to see a God that **is** Nature, a Nature that **is** God.

As most of you know, one of great exemplary figures for liberal, free-thinking religious people and communities such as the Unitarians [see the picture at the head of this post] is the seventeenth-century philosopher [Benedict Spinoza \(1632-1677\)](#) and our own Sunday morning service begins every week with an evocation and acknowledgement of the divine using his evocative phrase, 'God, or Nature' (deus sive natura) where the 'or' (sive) is that of equivalence; in some fashion god **is** nature, nature **is** god.

It's an important basic term/idea for us as a modern, rational, pro-scientific, religious tradition because, as [Frederick C. Beiser](#) put it in his book ['After Hegel: German Philosophy, 1840-1900'](#) (Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 4):

Spinoza's famous phrase 'deus sive natura' made it possible to both divinize nature and naturalize the divine. Following that dictum, a scientist, who professed the most radical naturalism, could still be religious; and a pastor, who confessed the deepest personal faith in God, could still be a naturalist.

Spinoza — and those who have run with and developed his basic ideas — began the process of tearing down all the borders of the earth, or at least as they were imagined by the psalmist and tried (and for some of us) succeeded in affecting that interpenetration, co-mingling and process of becoming one — at-one-ment, atonement — with God-or-Nature.

In short Spinoza found a way to bring light/darkness, good/evil, life/death back together in the immortal play or dances of nature doing what nature does ([natura naturans](#)).

I find that Celia's lyric achieves this too. Singing it today helps me understand that the cycling of light and darkness and the different things they reveal can always serve to bring meaning and purpose to my life in a way that doesn't require the existence of another world of eternal light beyond the one I inhabit now. Celia's lyric suggests to me a creative world which is always-already continually being shaped and crafted by the material conditions of nature as she appears. Celia's lyric reminds me that this is an astonishing ever unfolding dark/light world, one that's never still and so it is only ever in this moment that 'we have, the chance to make / Each moment matter, for Truth's sake.'

As we prepare to move into the New Year and decade unsure whether we are going to be moving from a time of darkness into light or from a time of light into darkness this making 'each moment matter, for Truth's sake' seems more important than ever.

Whether we find this coming year of 2020 a light or dark one my New Year hope remains the same, namely, that we will not forget the message of Celia's hymn that in the darkness as much

as in the light, in life as much as in death, we are all always-already dancing dances as imitate aspects of God-or-Nature. It is only by consciously giving ourselves up to this natural dance that the at-one-ment we have always sought will come to pass.

A happy, dancing, entangled with God-or-Nature New Year to you all.