

2003 Eugene England Memorial Personal Essay Contest, Second Place Winner

MURKY PONDS AND LIGHTED PLACES: PARADOX AND PARAGON

By Carol Clark Ottesen

AS A CHILD, I KNEW MY PARENTS WERE AS IN LOVE as any two people could be. This is what being one means, I thought, even though I knew they were two, even though my mother occasionally called my father a “calamity howler.” This title, as far as I could tell, meant something like this: mother fixes a lovely lunch for a family trip to the mountains while Dad looks for some barf bags. I’d laugh when she said it, thinking somebody had to be the sunshine person and somebody had to be real. So later, when I read Emerson’s essay, “Unity and Variety” describing the universal pull between these two impulses, I nodded in assent, thinking of my parents as the paradigm of this paradox. I recalled a vivid image I have of them waltzing together in the living room, he in his suit and she in her housedress, connected, moving to the same music, one yet two.

But the years accrue, contradictions seem less likely to meld, the duality becomes more complex, the *either/ors* more mandatory, religion more polarized, the paradox of every human relationship fraught with contradiction.

I go back and back to an indelible memory—the day I brought my first child home from the hospital. I knew then that contradiction is more than just a difference in individual perspective. As I placed my new son in the crib, the reality hit me, “I can put him there away from me physically, but he is my responsibility for the rest of my life. I will never again be the person I was before!” Being a parent was an ominous burden, yet the joy was so much more exquisite than I had ever dreamed. The opposites warred in me. Nothing has changed since. My children bring me joy so palpable I can taste it and pain I never thought possible.

Humor helps make small islands of comfort in between those extremes. My then seventeen-year-old son was assigned

a topic on Mother’s Day, “My Mother, the Paragon of Virtue.” I groaned, thinking, “Who thinks up these guilt trips?” I said, “Please, Eric, just be true in your talk.” I didn’t know how close he would come to the mark. I went to church that morning, even more uneasy than I usually am on Mothers Day. He stood and announced his subject in a too-loud voice, “My Mother, the Paradox of Virtue.” A few people tittered. Then the congregation broke into open laughter. I was relieved but also just a little tweaked. He said the error was unintentional, but I have some reason to doubt this, knowing his devious edge, paternally inherited. But ever since then, as I realize only now, I reach for paragon but remain a paradox. I am barely consoled that even the creation story sets up the paradoxical nature of life. Eve had to break one commandment to keep the other.

I remember the battering of graduate school, the constant challenges to belief, the split between what I had experienced and what I felt I should be as a graduate student. Deconstruction theories chewed away at absolutes; the subtle attractions of “higher criticism” sometimes blurred the fine line between what to keep and what to throw away. Believing in angels and visions became more antithetical to being a credible scholar. As I wrote about Emerson and the “abyss” he experienced in his later years, I clung with some desperation to an earlier experience that had established for me the presence of a personal God.

I read again Isaiah’s scriptural antidote, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace, that bringeth good tidings of good . . .” (Isaiah 52:7). I had first read this scripture as a teenager and memorized it so it could sing in me. My mother was dying of cancer; four young children were being left to my care, and here was a bit of Hebrew poetry I probably didn’t even fully understand but was lifted by the music of its words. With youthful idealism, I hung on to this scripture and decided that no matter what, those beautiful feet on the mountain would be mine. I wouldn’t be a “calamity howler.”

My resolve was challenged further when I was asked to lecture at a California college about poetry and a student at the



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back raised the question, "I've read your book. Why is your poetry so optimistic in a world that in reality is so dark?" My quick answer then had come from Bruce B. Clark's line, "If it is unrealistic to paint the world too rosy, it is also unrealistic to paint it too black."¹ "Yes," I said, "I have experienced significant challenges in my life, but the world to me still points to hopefulness." I don't think the student was entirely satisfied with my answer. I probably wasn't. Was I too much like Browning's Pippa, skipping through the flowers saying, "All's right with the world?"

I found some consolation in a familiar image discovered in a book, *Process Theology*, by philosophers John B. Cobb and David Ray Griffin, that seemed to ratify the view of a sentient God who has planted in us a "lure" that pulls us toward the good and the beautiful. This lure makes us want to be like him. And, in addition, God himself, "not only enjoys all enjoyments but also suffers all sufferings, is an Adventurer in the quest for . . . perfection."²

So if one is to be God-like, one must enjoy all joys, suffer all sufferings, in other words, be open to feeling—all heights and depths. And this is the hard part, for life can atrophy, if only from the fatigue of everydayness, or from the unwillingness to think of suffering or challenge as blocks to our progress rather than absolutely necessary in the attainment of spiritual maturity. And joy? It happens—but also we learn to catch it as it comes by, and to do so is to be "lured" back to Him.

I WAS LURED this morning by the howls of coyotes in the field at the foot of Sierra Bonita where we live, a cry both haunting and beautiful. I think of difference—my husband was born and raised among these mountains; for him, their velvet ridges splay out like sheltering arms; he uses mountains as a gauge for where he is. But when we first moved here from the beach, the mountains to me felt almost smothering, as if they blocked my view. I longed to look out until I saw the gentle blue curve of the western horizon. But it's more than that. The tenor of the culture here is both warm and familiar but also can be constricting and limited. My friend calls these impulses her "coyotes," and she pets them when they howl.

In my two years in China, I saw more superficial contradictions: a wooden cart pulled by a donkey nearly sideswiped by a speeding red taxi; a new TV set on the dirt floor of a country hovel; a shining McDonald's near a stand selling fried scorpions on skewers; hostile leaders in contrast to a populace

hungry for foreign acceptance. But the oppositions that war inside, the ones we have to deal with in response to experience, tend to grind in the stomach, eat away at one's own perceptions. But it was precisely this experience away from the familiar, as I illustrate in these journal entries, that brought my husband's mountains and my beach together.



The "sunshine girl" and the "calamity howler" on their wedding day
Mesa, Arizona, 26 June 1929

Mother fixes a lovely lunch for a family trip to the mountains while Dad looks for some barf bags. . . . Somebody had to be the sunshine person, and somebody had to be real.

me quickly, "Tension is high. Don't go outside of the university."

Meanwhile, we go about our business of teaching, always hoping, but never quite knowing if anything we say makes a big difference. We had many students visit our apartment this week, some bearing gifts, some only a little lonely or wanting a favor. But every day, we are witnesses to the gratitude of these Chinese students. The contradictions are immense between public policy and what we experience in our personal interactions.

For example: Three male former students showed up at our door on Monday from Jinan where we had taught three years ago. They spent the afternoon and continued to talk through dinner in the dining hall—about the future, about love, about believing. Though we cannot talk about religion, somehow they know. We embraced as they left and one of them said, "We are your sons forever." This kind of interaction happens nearly every day; the bond we feel with our students is deep, real, and absolutely transcends the contradictions of culture, age, or politics.

Just yesterday, a new student from Mongolia came after

class, waiting to talk until everyone was gone. He hesitated, head down, restraining his emotion. "I feel so inferior." he said, "With all these smart students who know so much about the world, I think I must go back home. But I want to tell you one thing made me stay. When you hand back my paper on first day, you thank me for a good paper. No teacher ever said thank you to me before. So I say to you now, thank you for saying thank you. Then I think maybe there is kindness here." I was amazed, but he was actually sincere—his eyes were even teary—and I puzzled at his response to what we would think of as ordinary courtesy. Yet planes still bump, and we seem on the brink of war.



MAY 2001 PEKING

UNIVERSITY: The frogs sing so loudly in the murky pond in front of our apartment that they must be as big as horses, yet I stand on the edge, and I cannot see even one. Submerged voices, oh submerged voices. Only occasionally do I read a student paper with light coming through.

I have selected Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" for my English majors to read, not because it is my favorite but because it is short. They have no texts here; I must either read aloud or duplicate copies myself for a class of thirty-five. Before class, I re-read the story. The Spanish word *nada* (nothing) dominates; certainly this story is a paradigm of existentialism. But gradually the irony emerges. A deaf, old man sits drinking in a café, a clean, well-lighted place as two waiters debate how to get rid of this man before he's too drunk to pay the bill. In the dialogue of the two waiters, we find the old man has tried to commit suicide but was saved by his niece for "fear for his soul."

I listen to the interplay of light and shadow in this spare story, the shadow of leaves on the man's face, the street light, the darkness of other bars, the contradictions and self-contradictions of the waiters, the fear of loneliness, of nothingness. Yet here is a clean, well-lighted place, the old man is drawn to it, and he does not leave until he is forced to because the young waiter is "in a hurry." The older waiter says he wants to stay there "with all those who need a light for the night" and then he will go home, where finally, with daylight, he will sleep. I looked up the date Hemingway wrote this story—1937, early in his career, before the light

dimmed and he chose the dark course of suicide.

In class the next day, I read the first two pages to the class and suggested a few questions as they read the rest of the story: Is this story predominantly about light or dark, "being or nothingness"? Then I wondered if a second language might be a barrier to understanding metaphors, or if the students might be too used to a proscribed meaning. But yet they do live with huge ambiguities.

Never doubt the Chinese skill at metaphor and irony—the papers come full of light; certainly they acknowledged the darkness, but only one or two saw futility. Perhaps this is their youth; perhaps their quickness. After all, they are the top 2 percent of Chinese students. But from their writing, I know there is more. To get to this university, their childhood has not been carefree—they have studied literally

night and day, some by candlelight, some at the cost of their eyesight and physical health. I also know of the great sacrifices of their parents; I know their loneliness and deprivation; I know they long for freedom. Yet in this story, they found light. They, too, look for a clean, well-lighted place (certainly not their squalid dorm rooms); they respond to the lure of hope and belief.



(Top) "sons forever"; (Bottom) author (front row, center) with medical students
Shandong Medical University, Peoples Republic of China.

We talked in the shadows at length about God, about light, about hope, about her headstrong determination to help her people. The orange light from the heater seared the dark and warmed us. "China needs something to believe in," she said.

the depth of my affection for the Chinese people, nor the depth of my frustration at contradictions such as having our apartment bugged and then being so unabashedly appreciated by our students, or students describing throwing rocks at the U.S. embassy and then buying me a dozen roses from their meager allowances. The yellow, dusty sky of Beijing has no clarity; the pond in front of our apartment is beautiful from a distance, but up close, cluttered with human debris.

In China, my husband and I had to "get it together," never more so than when we went back to Shandong one snowy day to visit former students and rented a room in the same complex as the BYU teachers who had succeeded us, Becky and Ken Mitchell. We had no heat in our room, so Ken appeared at

SO WHEN I am asked, "So, how was it in China?" I usually say, "An incomparable experience," which is true, but does not fully describe

our door with a small heater they had purchased just that day. “We’ve been using our toaster oven with the door open for a little heat. We can still use it, so we bought this heater for you to use while you’re here; we know how unbearable it is.” I stood at the door shivering, even in all the clothes I could possibly put on, but warmed clear through by this offering. We felt selfish, but thoroughly grateful as we received students on and off all day and huddled, knees together by the little heater. Most of the students left, but one girl lingered, one who was the top of her medical school class and who would soon have her doctor’s degree. We sat on stiff chairs, sharing a blanket between us, focused on the bright light of the small heater. Cold but warm, dark but light. We talked in the shadows at length about God, about light, about hope, about her headstrong determination to help her people. The orange light from the heater seared the dark and warmed us. “China needs something to believe in,” she said. I thought of C.S. Lewis’ description of these kinds of experiences as “patches of Godlight” that in the dark give us a “tiny theophany.”³

I had taken a book to China to read, *The Emerging Goddess: The Creative Process in Art, Science, and Other Fields*, that posits the simultaneous existence of opposites, using art as an example of light and dark juxtaposed into one frame. In this book, the Roman deity Janus has many faces that look in several opposite directions at the same time. In relationship to looking at a work of art, Janusian thinking, then, consists of “actively conceiving two or more opposite or antithetical ideas, images, or concepts simultaneously. Opposites or antitheses are conceived as existing side by side as equally operative and equally true.”⁴ A work of art, then, is a synthesis of opposites. So, I thought, if I am to make life a work of art, I must think of “perfection” not as a linear attainment but as a circumscription, a wholeness.

Our challenge then, my challenge, is to integrate, to bring opposites together under a creative focus, living life in a kind of divine equipoise, the equipoise of a God who is both Jehovah and Christ, both just and merciful—who has told us we must lose ourselves to find ourselves, who both carries us on his wings yet leaves us alone to grow. For me, the problem distills to a simple crystalline solution: *learn to see as God sees*.

The rhetoric is easy, the task infinitely harder. Some contradictions are inextricable, and synthesis is a process rather than an event that may continue even after mortality. Though my view still splits occasionally, I am hungry always to go back to the freedom of seeing a macrocosmic world. I want to look many ways at once, to get to the point where I don’t feel I have to change anyone. I want to be on the side of the newly activated Primary teacher who pulls her dress down over her tattooed ankle when the leader asks the children, “Can you get in the temple if you have a tattoo?” I want to see the dilemma of a child abused by her father who sits in Primary trying to sing, “I’m So Glad When Daddy Comes Home.” I want to love the new bishop who cannot see the contradictions or ambiguities. This does not mean just tolerating, but freely loving from my deepest, most authentic place. The result is joy that we taste,

hear, see, touch, and feel in every pore. The gate is still strait, but the perspective is as wide as God’s.

I THINK OF my father whose whole life had been teaching and writing, who suffered a debilitating stroke that left him without speech or the ability to write. But every morning, he insisted on writing in his journal, painstakingly, with his left hand. This one sentence took him nearly an hour to write in wavering script on his pad: “This is a good day.”

Where was the “calamity howler?” He was probably there—but touched certainly, by “patches of Godlight.” These are the great ironies, the marvelous contradictions that help make us whole, the oppositions that help us see clear to the bottom of a murky pond. ☞

NOTES


1. Bruce B. Clark, “The Appreciation of Beauty,” *Out of the Best Books*, Vol. 4 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1968), 162.
2. John B. Cobb and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 75.
3. Terry W. Glaspey, *Not a Tame Lion: The Spiritual Legacy of C. S. Lewis* (Nashville: Cumberland House Publishing, Inc., 1996), 91.
4. Albert M. D. Rothenberg, *The Emerging Goddess: The Creative Process in Art, Science and Other Fields* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 55.

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