

The Readings for the morning were six poems by Billy Collins.

Poems read by Judy Rosenthal were "Picnic Lightning," "Rooms," and "The Dead."

Poems read by Harold Dean James were "Thank-You Notes," "Writing in the Afterlife," and "No Time."

THE BURDEN AND BLESSING OF MORTALITY

by Reverend Wyman Rousseau

'Tis again the season of the most colorful festival on the Mexican calendar - EL DIA DE MEURTOS, a festival of marigolds, ofrendas, Catrinas and Catrins, calaveras, velas, decorated cemeteries, a season of telling family stories, of inviting the dead to come back and visit us for a while, of reminding us of our own mortality - that we too will someday be just bone and grimace. And one of fascinating aspects of Day of the Dead is that the build up for it is festive, not somber. As the Day of the Dead gets closer, each day brings more excitement, more anticipation.

I was inspired to compose these reflections and remarks by a little poem, a haiku, by the 17th century haiku writer, Matsuo Basho:

*nothing in the cry
of cicadas suggests they
are about to die*

Organic life is a continuum that runs through plants and animals to humans, and is recognized by organic capabilities such as metabolism, movement, appetite, feeling, perception, imagination, art and thinking. There appears to be an ascending order of awareness to organic life - not all organisms share with us the same quality of self-awareness, and consciousness of their living and dying.

*nothing in the cry
of cicadas suggest they
are about to die*

The cicadas do not know that they die, but the poet knows they will. And Basho is also aware of his own inevitable death. Basho is also — indirectly — expressing his gratitude to be alive.

The “burden” of mortality is our awareness that we will die, that our timespan on earth is limited.

The “blessing” of mortality is of a different color. It is the recognition that we “must die,” allowing new generations - who will see the world with fresh eyes, and with new dreams and actions - to have their day under the sun.

When we began our life journey - we were the ones who saw the world with fresh eyes while others had long been here. This is the pattern of generations - and generational succession and generational perspectives. Youth, with its fumbling and follies - versus older generations dulled by habit and forgetfulness.

Youth with its eagerness and questioning is the eternal hope of humankind. The “blessing of mortality” — the recognition that we “must” die makes sense— aging brings with it mental and physical debilitations, — and the loss of loved ones, close friends and family —who would want to live forever. It’s a blessing that we die.

Even when poetry’s theme is “mortality” poetry can give us pleasure - the pleasure of sound, of rhythm, of metaphor - the pleasure of meaning. Billy Collins uses the tactics of light entertainment to broach serious topics.

One way a poem gives us pleasure is by taking us to imaginary places very quickly, because poetry, as an art form, enjoys one of the highest levels of imaginative freedom. For example:

THE AFTERLIFE

by Billy Collins (edited)

*While you are preparing for sleep, brushing your teeth,
or riffling through a magazine in bed,
the dead of the day are setting out on their journey.*

*They are moving off in all imaginable directions,
each according to his own private belief,
and this is the secret that silent Lazarus would not reveal:
that everyone is right, as it turns out.*

*You go to the place you always thought you would go,
the place you kept lit in an alcove in your head.*

*Some are being shot up a funnel of flashing colors
into a zone of light, white as a January sun.
Other are standing naked before a forbidding judge who sits
with a golden ladder on one side, a coal chute on the other.*

*Some have already joined the celestial choir
and are singing as if they have been doing this forever,
while the less inventive find themselves stuck
in a big air-conditioned room full of food and chorus girls.*

*Some are approaching the apartment of the female God,
a woman in her forties with short wiry hair
and glasses hanging from her neck by a string.
With one eye she regards the dead through a hole in her door....*

There are those who are squeezing into the bodies

*of animals — eagles and leopards — and one trying on
the skin of a monkey like a tight suit,
ready to begin another life in a more simple key,*

*while others float off into some benign vagueness,
little units of energy heading for the ultimate elsewhere.*

Billy Collins calls himself a “gateway” poet. Gateway poets, he says, are poets who write accessible rather than academic poetry. His poems come to us radiating a sense of playfulness.

Read a lot of his poems and you quickly come to the recognition that one of his recurring themes is human mortality. He says the inclusion of “death” as a major theme in his poetry is not a reflection of his own trepidation about dying, or concern about his own personal mortality. Rather, mortality, he says is a theme engrained in lyric poetry. And while that may be true - having been born the same year as Billy, 1941, I cannot but believe that concern about his own impending demise is a regular, almost daily thought - and I can't believe he is not jarred each time when someone of our generation dies, like Tom Hayden (this past week). I met Tom only once but have a cherished memory of our ten minute conversation, which took place at the University of Chicago in '68, before the '68 Democratic Convention began. It's jarring to think someone with his moral stamina is no longer among us.

When I was starting out in my career as a minister, back in 1969, in Westboro, MA, the head of our Central Massachusetts District was a minister in his late 60's, and he told me once that he started every day with a hot cup of coffee, and a couple newspapers, reading through the obituaries in the Chelmsford paper and in the NY Times. At the time I found his morning ritual a little weird. I don't any longer. Life these days has the feeling of being a battleground, where your fellow fighters are

falling to your left and to your right. Death, some days, appears a bit too close for comfort.

Consciousness/awareness of our own mortality does not always bring us comfort or satisfaction, so we look for consolations. We have a strong urge to make sense of death. Indeed, a major preoccupation of theologians, philosophers and poets is trying to make sense of death.

In order to feel more comfortable with our own mortality we seek consolations, such as trying to see our mortality in a better light, a light that depicts death as a benign or good thing.

I acknowledge this may be part of my desire to understand mortality as both a burden we carry around with us every day, but also a blessing.

Like the ancient Greek philosopher, Epicurus, we may seek to console ourselves by thinking — as long as we are alive, our death has not yet happened. And once death occurs, we are no longer around to suffer it. The two - life and death - never touch, never overlap - so why fear death.

Or, like Buddhists, we console ourselves with the belief that because there is no such thing as the Self, there is no such thing as death.

Or we console ourselves with the thought that within this mortal life, we can acquire all the intimations of immortality we could ever desire. A well-lived mortal life offers us everything immortality could, so death deprives us of nothing.

Or we may think — immortality itself would actually be an awful fate, so mortality is much to be preferred. Wouldn't living forever become incredible boring? Better we die.

Or we console ourselves by thinking the principle losses we associate with being dead happen to us in life anyway. Life, with its losses, is itself

nothing but an imitation of death. We carry death with us at every moment. As Joan Didion reminds us: those we are closest to can die or walk out on us, we lose friends by death or betrayal, we lose jobs we love, beloved homes, treasured keepsakes, life-sustaining ideals. In the face of all these potential losses death seems benign.

Billy Collins says elsewhere, *"We are all playing the mortality game. It's the subject at the heart of western poetry. At one point (says Collins), poetry was about history, if you read the Homeric epics and things like that. But poetry is no longer about history. Poetry is about time, and what I would call the romance of time. The romance of time means we're running out of it, right? That's why carpe diem is such a resounding theme in English poetry."*

At the end of one of his poems called, "Greece," Collins writes:

*Is not poetry a megaphone held up
to the whispering lips of death?*

Collins writes *"I used to tell students who were going to major in poetry that they were really majoring in death."*

Many of Billy's poems on death have a playfulness to them, as some that you heard Judy and Harold read. The poems are clever, humorous, and shield us from darker visions. But one I came across seemed more serious. It's called "Reaper":

*As I drove north along a country road
on a bright spring morning
I caught the look of a man on the roadside
who was carrying an enormous scythe on his shoulder.*

*He was not wearing a long black cloak
with a hood to conceal his skull —
rather a torn white tee-shirt
and a pair of loose khaki trousers.*

*But still, as I flew past him,
he turned and met my glance
as if I had an appointment in Samarra,¹
not just the usual lunch at the Raccoon Lodge.*

*There was no sign I could give him
in that instant — no casual wave,
or thumbs-up, no two-fingered V
that would ease the jolt of fear*

*whose voltage ran from my ankles
to my scalp — just the glimpse,
the split-second lock of the pupils
like catching the eye of a stranger on a passing train.*

*And there was nothing to do
but keep driving, turn off the radio,
and notice how white the houses were,
and red the barns, and green the sloping fields.*

In this Ingmar Bergman like scene — Do the last lines suggest the colors of Mexico - unintentionally? Is he making an illusion to the Day of the Dead?

¹ Word Origin and History for Samarra

city in north-central Iraq; phrase *an appointment in Samarra* indicating the inevitability of death is from an old Arabic tale (first in English apparently in W. Somerset Maugham's play "Sheppey," 1933), in which a man encounters Death (with a surprised look on his bony face) one day in the marketplace in Baghdad; he flees in terror and by dusk has reached Samarra. Death takes him there, and, when questioned, replies, "I was astonished to see him in Baghdad, for I had an appointment with him tonight in Samarra."

In Billy Collins's world people don't fully die but remain alive in his imagination and retain the personalities they had when they were alive. In a poem called "Grave," Collins visits his parents' graves, presses his ear to the ground and asks them what they think of his new glasses. *"They make you look very scholarly, / I hear my mother say."*

In one of the poems Harold read called, "No Time," Collins speeds past his parent's cemetery, apologizes for his rushing by, and for the rest of the day is haunted by their reaction: *"All day long, I think of him rising up / to give me that look / of knowing disapproval / While my mother calmly tells him to lie back down."*

In his poems, Collins communicates with the dead—talking to and with the dead. Not as crazy as it sounds. It's a part of the Mexican Day of the Dead, when the dead come back to visit us. I've caught myself imagining a conversation with my dead parents. At other times I think I hear what they might say to me. And definitely in dreams we have our conversations with the dead.

In his poetry, Collins imagines his own demise. In "Rooms," that Judy read - after three days of *"steady, inconsolable rain,"* the narrator walks through his house and offers a running commentary about which room would be best to die in. The poem's diction is detached and detective like:

*The study is an obvious choice
with its thick carpet and soothing paint ...*

And the kitchen has a certain appeal ...

Then there is the dining room,

*just the place to end up facedown
at one end of its long table in a half-written letter ...*

In another poem, “Breathless,” —he begins with a contemplation of people’s sleeping positions and concludes with a declaration of how he wishes to be buried:

*After a lifetime of watchfulness
and nervous vigilance,
I will be more than ready for sleep,*

*so never mind the dark suit,
the ridiculous tie
and the pale limp arms crossed on the chest.*

*Lower me down in my slumber,
tucked into myself
like the oldest fetus on earth,*

*and while the cows look over the stone wall
of the cemetery, let me rest here
in my earthy little bedroom,*

*my lashes glazed with ice,
the roots of trees inching nearer,
and no dreams to frighten me anymore.*

No bone-chilling deaths here. No extended suffering before death. These are pleasant, peaceful deaths. No agony or terror. Not the unflinching look at death that you find in the poetry of someone like Lucia Perillo, who suffered from MS from the time she was diagnosed with it at age 30 to her death this past week at 58.

No —these are playful imaginings. The sort of deaths we all desire. The poems reflect the ephemeral nature of our lives and the need for us to be gentle and loving with each other.

THE PARADE

by Billy Collins

*How exhilarating it was to march
along the great boulevards
in the sun flash of trumpets
and under all the waving flags—
the flag of ambition, the flag of love.*

*So many of us streaming along—
all of humanity, really—
moving in perfect step,
yet each lost in the room of a private dream.*

*How stimulating the scenery of the world,
the rows of roadside trees,
the huge curtain of sky.*

*How endless it seemed until we veered
off the broad turnpike
into a pasture of high grass,
headed toward the dizzying cliffs of mortality.*

*Generation after generation
we keep shouldering forward
until we step off the lip into space.*

And I should not have to remind you

*that little time is given here
to rest on a wayside bench,
to stop and bend to the wildflowers,
or to study a bird on a branch—*

*not when the young
are always shoving from behind,
not when the old keep tugging us forward,
pulling on our arms with all their feeble strength.*

In the concluding verse of this poem, the “blessing” of mortality makes its appearance again. Without the constant arrival of the newcomers, the wellspring of human novelty would go dry, for those grown older have found their answers and gotten set in their ways. This ever-renewed “beginning” - which comes with the ever-repeated “ending” is humankind’s safeguard against lapsing into boredom and routine —its hope of retaining spontaneity.

And the knowledge that we are here but briefly, and have a nonnegotiable limit to our expected time on earth, works well as an incentive to number our days and make them count.

This morning we have been doing a little contemplating of the inevitable, contemplating our own demise as refracted through the poetry of Billy Collins. Paradoxically any contemplation of death, produces as a by product, a more focused appreciation of life - a heightened sense of being alive - fragile and transitory though life be.

This morning, we wish to recognize the passing of family members and friends — who have died in the past two years.

We remember that someone's father or mother may also have been some child's grandparent or someone's uncle or aunt. We are interconnected with each other in multiple ways.

May the thoughts of these moments be thoughts of tenderness and gratitude and love for...

Farley Wilder Wheelwright

Peggy Bell

Helen Morris

Pauline Goodwin

Franklin Goodwin

Paula Powers

Michael Spalding

Michelina Podesta

Karen Hemmalin

Sharon Stea

David Cash

Monica Lamoureaux Achatz

Ray Lewis

L. C. Hick Jr.

Katherine Greenhouse

Phyllis Bilick

Madalena Burle Marx

Edward Forster

Thom Smitham

Ann Rowan

Betty Jane Koford

John Alexander Farmakis

Dennis Leon

Domenic Creonte

Martha Schweppe

Deborah Alguiar-Velez

Clement Don Lamoureaux

If there are additional names you wish to add to this list, please speak them aloud now...

We would share with each other our consciousness of sorrow and loss, just as we do our joys. May we gain from our joys and sorrows the wisdom of patience and sympathy, the courage to live faithfully by those values and principles we personally find authentic — and may we come to know that dark hours may have precious meanings too. And may we gain a deepening sense of the sacredness and worth of a life well lived.

Let us join in reading responsively reading numbered 720, “We Remember Them”