

HEROES OF THE Creative SPIRIT:



Emily D. Dickinson

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by Nancy Hurrelbrinck

*We both believe, and disbelieve,
a hundred times an Hour,
which keeps Believing nimble.*
—Emily Dickinson, 1882

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) once wrote to a friend, “My life has been too simple and stern to embarrass any.” Given that she spent most of her days in her parents’ house, rarely leaving it or receiving visitors after age thirty, her remark seems accurate. Yet when asked if she ever “felt want of employment,” she replied, “I never thought of conceiving that I could ever have the slightest approach to such a want in all future time...I find ecstasy in living — the mere sense of living is joy enough.” The poet’s seemingly eventless life was charged with affection for her intimates, with delight in nature, ideas, music, and books (“those enthralling friends”), and with a passion for writing about all of these.

Dickinson left a fascinating record of her preoccupations in 1,789 poems and 1,049 letters, the latter probably a fraction of those she sent. She loved questions, particularly unanswerable ones: “In a life that had stopped guessing,” she wrote to her sister-in-law, “you and I should not feel at home.” The questions she never answered, nor ceased asking, included these:

What is the nature of grief?

Pain – has an Element of Blank...

How do others bear their sorrows?

*I measure every Grief I meet
With narrow, probing, eyes...*

What kindles desire?

*A Charm invests a face
Imperfectly beheld...*

What would it be like to die?

I heard a Fly buzz – when I died...

Do the dead get lonely?

*I’m sorry for the Dead – Today –
It’s such congenial times...*

What is the nature of consciousness?

The Brain – is wider than the Sky...

Was she a good poet?

*The Mind is so near itself –
it cannot see, distinctly –
and I have none to ask.*

Did she make the right choice to sequester herself and write?

*...I fear me this – Is Loneliness –
The Maker of the soul
It’s Caverns and it’s Corridors
Illuminate – or seal –*

Her most persistent questions concerned religion. Is there a God? Is there an afterlife? How does it feel to be “saved”? Does prayer work? Is it possible to believe in God and not lose oneself?

Dickinson inhabited a culture soaked in Christianity. During her year as a student at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, her teachers made a point of “advising” girls who hadn’t been “saved,” reminding them that “it’s not too late.” The poet felt perhaps even more pressured back in her native Amherst when revival meetings were in town, when “every day felt like Sunday,” she said, and “the faces of good men shine, and bright halos come round them and the eyes of the disobedient look down, and become ashamed.” She wrote to Jane Humphrey, a close friend:

Christ is calling everyone here, all my companions have answered, even my darling [sister] Vinnie believes she loves, and trusts him, and I am standing alone in rebellion, and growing very careless. Abby, Mary, Jane, and farthest of all my Vinnie have been seeking, and they all

believe they have found; I can't tell *what* they have found, but *they* think it is something precious. I wonder if it is?

Though only nineteen at the time, the poet exhibited the honesty and integrity that would characterize her spiritual enquiry for the rest of her life. She kept quiet about her doubts with those who found them troubling, but aired them freely with those she trusted. The poet even expressed gratitude for the impossibility of arriving at any definite conclusions. At forty-six, she wrote to her cousins, Louise and Frances Norcross, "It is true that the unknown is the largest need of the intellect, though for it, no one thinks to thank God."

Dickinson explored her doubts thoroughly in her poems, constantly rephrasing her questions about the cosmos. She seemed to be ever changing her mind about whether God exists, what he might be like ("a distant stately lover?"), and whether it's worth trying to reach him ("Of Course – I prayed / And did God Care?..."). She confesses in one poem, "I prayed, at first, a little Girl, / Because they told me to..." Dickinson then concedes that she later found it implausible that God could come whenever she called, yet marvels at "the force 'twould be / To have a God so strong as that / To hold my life for me." In "A loss of something ever felt I..." she also harks back to childhood, when she felt like "the only Prince cast out," admitting that, even now, "I find Myself still softly searching / For my Delinquent Palaces." Yet, in another poem, she insists, "I know that He exists / Somewhere – in Silence..." and describes our search for God as a cosmic game of peek-a-boo that's only resolved "in Death's – stiff – stare."

Dickinson also wonders about the nature of heaven in her poems. For all that we "pray to and prate of" it, we have no idea what it is – "a Place – a Sky – a Tree"? – but then, "Location's narrow way is for Ourselves – / Unto the Dead / There's no Geography." She expresses envy for her deceased ancestors in "Those fair – fictitious People..." because they've already arrived at "places perfecter," and

have the luxury of "Knowing – where We only hope." Yet, in her letters of condolence, the poet was gracious enough to feign belief in heaven: when her cousin's young daughter died, she wrote, "I hope Heaven is warm – There are so many Barefoot ones – I hope it is near – the little Tourist was so small."

In the end, Dickinson never decided anything about the nature of the cosmos, nor did she ever stop wondering. She might have embraced Rainer Maria Rilke's advice in *Letters to a Young Poet*: "Try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books written in a foreign language." Dickinson loved any kind of riddle, the grander and more mysterious, the better. In the following poem, she celebrates her – and humanity's – spiritual quest.

*This World is not Conclusion.
A Species stands beyond –
Invisible, as Music –
But positive, as Sound –
It beckons, and it baffles –
Philosophy – don't know –
And through a Riddle, at the last –
Sagacity, must go –
To guess it, puzzles scholars –
To gain it, Men have borne
Contempt of Generations
And Crucifixion, shown –
Faith slips – and laughs, and rallies –
Blushes, if any see –
Plucks at a twig of Evidence –
And asks a Vane, the way –
Much Gesture, from the Pulpit –
Strong Hallelujahs roll –
Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
That nibbles at the soul –*

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*No part of mind is permanent.
This startles the happy,
but it assists the sad...*