
“Learn by Heart”

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Upon first reading William Wordsworth's (1798/1988) *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*, his words did not yet hold much meaning for me. The outdated style of speech and poetry was initially difficult to grasp meaning through. However, as I split the poem passage up into more manageable sections, I was able to reflect week-by-week in order to gain a deeper comprehension, not only of the words, but of the emotions behind them. Learning this passage coincidentally coincided with my first winter really becoming a cross-country skier and I am now convinced that I will forever associate these two arguably related exercises. In my first week, I reflected that Wordsworth's "For I have learned to look on nature not as in the hour of thoughtless youth," seemed applicable to my learning cross-country skiing in my mid-thirties, writing, "I imagine that had I developed a passion for XC when I was younger, my focus may have had more to do with the physical exercise than the appreciation of my surroundings." I wondered whether the subsequent line, "but hearing oftentimes the still sad music of humanity," (Wordsworth, 1798/1988) meant that Wordsworth too lamented the relentless "progress" of human economic "development," as I do. I imagine him to have been raised in an idyllic pastoral setting, witnessing in adulthood the seemingly irreversible damage of population growth and economic "progress." Put together, I interpret these two lines to indicate his wisdom gained to appreciate the natural world, "a gratitude for something he may have taken for granted in his 'thoughtless' youth." I reflected also about the human world existing alongside the natural world, singing its sweet sad songs, claiming its place among nature. Similar to my reflections in "Making Thought Visible," I observed that, "We like to think ourselves separate from (or even above) Nature, but this is impossible. We come from Nature, we rely on Nature for survival, and we go back to Nature when we die." Lastly, in my first week's reflections, I noted that attaching meaning to a string of words helps us retain them and hope this indicates that my deep thought about these lines means they will always be with me.

In my second week, I worked with the lines, "nor harsh, nor grating, though of ample power to chasten and subdue," (Wordsworth, 1798/1988) and considered whether the sounds of chugging and churning of then-modern industry might be likened to a steady musical beat, an "anthropogenic tune [which] lulls most of us humans into submission, forced to participate in a system in society that we know

is destructive and problematic... and often not [even] forced, necessarily, but ignorant, and happy to do so.” While Wordsworth may not have named capitalism as a subduing power, I do not hesitate to.

When he wrote of “a presence that disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts,” (Wordsworth, 1988/1798), I wondered if he spoke of experiencing the Christian God through deep prayer. My experience with euphoria associated with a zen state is that this “elevated thought” can, in actuality, be *thoughtless* and represent a genuine embodied knowingness, where a ‘felt presence’ is less about associated thoughts per se, and more about a feeling of home. I wrote, “There’s a certain comfort I feel in wild spaces that I can only describe as a feeling of home,” and depicted an opposite of ecophobia in me, a rising of cortisol and anxiety induced by spaces lacking in nature, with dense populations all with elevated stress and haste, constant noise, lights, and chemical scents. I wonder if Wordsworth experienced a version of this stress, and chose to seek out natural spaces which brought him solace and quietude. Later that week, I read Dr. Puk’s (2021) article “Intree: Embodied experience in a flat screen world” and was glad to find scientific evidence for some of the urban symptoms I experience.

My process of learning, which has involved reciting the lines of the week in combination with hourly movement breaks (as well as ski ventures), means I now hear Wordsworth’s words each time I stand to stretch or walk. The calming effect of going intree for movement allows me to reflect that “There is certainly something special about bringing the poetry of the natural world to life through the poetry of human language. It makes me feel closer to the unseen presence of the unknown, and lately that has meant feeling closer to my late father.” He was a high school literature teacher who loved hikes, so this practice of going intree and learning words he would likely have read in his life “allows me to reach out and seek his presence, not necessarily in the space outside of myself, but his presence within me.” Wordsworth’s (1988/1798) line, “A sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused, whose dwelling is the light of setting suns” allows me to interpret my complicated relationship with my father as complex and “deeply interfused,” as is his presence within me, and to willingly envisage his dwelling as “the light of setting suns,” since his body may have departed from our Earthly plane, but I can consciously choose to feel his existence within and around me.

I believe the project's title, "Learn by Heart," deserves reflection as well. Ancient Greeks believed the heart to be the seat of intelligence and memory, and this is where the phrase comes from (Boo, 2010). The fact that our culture now connects "heart" with love, care, passion, courage and emotional wisdom (the "heart-wisdom" of feeling as opposed to the "head-wisdom" of reason) means that we can interpret "learn by heart" in a new way. In my journal reflections, I wrote,

To complete an action with the heart as the driving force is to put intuition first, to allow our feeling brain dominion over our thinking brain. So to learn "by heart" is to build an emotional connection with what we're learning, which research has shown makes it more memorable. To put your heart into a task/project, you're dedicated, passionate, and invested in a certain result. So as I learn "by heart," I am connecting [Wordsworth's] lines to emotional experiences of my own which helps me to fire synapses and potentially form new or strengthen/solidify existing neural pathways.

In that week's learned lines, the poet wrote more about the locations of the dwellings of the sense sublime. I claimed that "Life itself, in my opinion, is the Divine. There is 'Spirit' and 'motion' in setting suns, in the ocean, air, sky, and in humans as well. Again, we are not separate from nature, just as we are not separate from 'God'." While some might be offended by such a claim, I believe "God" to be "our interconnectedness with all things, our ability to love, our genuine awe in the face of beauty."

Finding gratitude in the beauty of our world is, I would argue, the purpose of life. We exist as sentient beings to appreciate the world we live in, divine interconnections, moments of enlightenment, and feelings of love (for ourselves, for others, for learning, for experiencing). I believe that Wordsworth would agree with me on this. When we forget our gratitude, we lose ourselves and our connection to the web of life. In my aunt's book, she positions gratitude as "a compass, a mirror, and a personal calibration tool for viewing life with a richer perspective. [...] Gratitude creates its own forcefield, and can generate a reciprocal flow of energy," (Widmer-Carson, 2021, p. 13). She calls gratitude the "hinge to the world beyond, connecting our soft spots to the larger universe. Through gratitude, we can look deeper inside ourselves and simultaneously see our place within the greater ecosystem of systems beyond,"

(Widmer-Carson, 2021, p. 11). I would argue that Wordsworth recognized this and communicated it through his poetry marked by reverence of the natural world.

“Therefore am I still a lover of the meadows and the woods, and mountains; and of all that we behold from this green earth; of all the mighty world of eye, and ear, – both what they half create, and what perceive,” (Wordsworth, 1988/1798). These lines caught my attention and sparked me to reflect deeply on the challenge imposed by the question.

I exist within the dominant societal structure. I am a cog in the machine. I participate in the system despite systemic injustices, globalization’s inefficiencies, unignorable negative externalities. [...]. It’s a very difficult position to be in... to perpetuate what pains you, because there is no visible/feasible/viable way out of it. [...] I do believe myself to be an ecophile, but can I truly embody this state while I go on living a modern life? Modern “civilization” has made it nearly impossible to live in harmony with the environment which sustains us. [...] Can I learn to live integrity with, care for, and be taken care of by, develop mutual trust and respect with [this green earth]? Can I employ the ethical principles of education in the context of our natural world [(OCT, n.d.)]? Can I learn to see and hear the world around me in a way that is metacognitively aware that what I experience is only half perceived, and half imagined, filtered through my social location, my life experiences, my unconscious biases, my subjective worldview? Can I offer up gratitude for that which brings beauty into the world without living a life that contributes to its destruction? Can I acknowledge/accept/reconcile the paradoxical nature of the modern environmentalist? If only half of my perceptions are reality and half are imagined, then I should be able to create a world in which these internal struggles are reconciled. And yet... and yet.. I cannot seem to close my eyes, to tear my gaze away from the dumpster fire that is late stage capitalism... And so I find both comfort and disheartening to know that a man 200 years ago was facing some of the same emotions on the matter of nature needing “protection” from us humans. I *am* still a lover of the meadows, and the woods, and mountains, and of all that we behold, but I am still learning how to be a good lover.

In my final reflection, I considered the line, “Well-pleased to recognize in nature and the language of the sense, the anchor of my purest thoughts,” (Wordsworth, 1988/1798) agreeing that time spent in nature truly is an anchor. Finding respite in nature, is now as in Wordsworth’s time, a way to tap into authentic and embodied experience, grounded in the moment through “the language of the sense.” Presence in nature allows for presence of Self. Nature, Wordsworth (1988/1798) contends, is “the nurse, the guide, the guardian of my heart;” nature is “the soul of all my moral being.”

That is because *I am nature*. Nature flows through me and I through it. We are indistinguishable except when I fall victim to societal demands, society which separates human from nature, builds walls between us and our home and has the audacity to call it home, society which forces me to participate in an economic system I fundamentally disagree with in order to simply survive, society which Others nature, demonizes her, fears her, society which has created a myth of unceasing and exponential growth. How dare they use a term previously reserved for natural processes for something so very unnatural and then call those who question their impossible myth “radical”? Wordsworth had it right when he retreated to a few miles above Tintern Abbey to contemplate existence and write his gratitudes for that which gives life. He understood nature to be his “nurse,” providing health-promoting properties, nursing him back to health after facing the damages done by living in the industrial world. Nature was also his “guide,” showing him the way... the way to enlightenment... the way within. Nature, too, was his “guardian,” protector of his heart and soul, enveloping him in a cocoon of comfort and safety. Nature, I realize now, was also his “God.” Wordsworth used the language of the day to communicate the spirituality he found there. He recognized Divinity in nature. He saw nature in himself and himself in nature so he found himself to be infused also with the Divine. The freedom and expansiveness one gains from such a realization is difficult to put into words. And yet, words were his worth, so he did not have a choice but to try. Anchoring this authentic knowing to the English language is somehow simultaneously a deep disservice and a great honoring.

Life itself is similarly paradoxical. In April 2021, I was given a journaling prompt after a yoga class to reflect on the question, “Who am I?” The piece I wrote then captures this paradox:

Who am I? Why, Alyssa, of course.

But that's just a name. What is deeper?

Well then I am everyone and therefore no one.

I am everything and I am nothing.

I am insignificant and yet my actions have ripples beyond generations.

I am both light and darkness.

I am all that is and I am a random convergence of cells, atoms, stardust.

I am love and I am pain.

I am dynamic stillness.

I am growth and stagnation.

I am simultaneously living and dying.

I am a cacophonous silence.

I am living in this current reality and I represent a paradigm shift.

I am clueless and I am wise.

I am humble and I am proud.

I am connected in community and I am alone, solitary, singular.

I am a constant stream of words and thoughts and I am deep silence.

I am a walking paradox.

As a human in this world, I crave nature, solitude, and quiet stillness, but I also require human connection.

The practice of learning this poem passage “by heart” has similarly been both a solitary and a social practice. I have learned the lines alone, and then recited them to my partners, my friends, and my mother, helping to solidify those neural pathways. The practice of combining my learning with walking and skiing has helped to embody the poem within my muscles. And the practice of reflecting weekly on each line, finding emotional and intellectual connections to Wordsworth’s words has served to imprint this poem forever in my mind, and on my heart and soul. Thank you for the opportunity.

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