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**Throw Yourself Like Seed (Colossians 3: 1-4)**

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Read poem:

<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mqrarchive/act2080.0011.004?node=act2080.0011.004:27&view=text&seq=63>

Spanish poet-philosopher Miguel de Unamuno was born in 1864 in Bilbao – Basque country – and died in 1936. He was rector of the University of Salamanca twice. His first stint, from 1900 to 1924, was terminated when Unamuno fell foul of the dictator General Miguel Primo de Rivera. Removed from his university post, he was banished to the Canary Islands and subsequently escaped to France where he lived until the fall of the dictatorship in 1930. Unamuno then returned to Spain and once again took up his rectorship at Salamanca. The day he returned to the university, Unamuno allegedly began his lecture with the words, ‘As we were saying yesterday ...’, just as another poet-professor – Luis de Leon – had done in 1576 on his return to the same university after four years of imprisonment by the Spanish Inquisition.

Within a few years of Unamuno’s reinstatement, however, Spain was once more wracked by political upheaval and the emergence of General Franco’s fascist forces. In 1936, Unamuno denounced this movement in a public address described as a ‘remarkable act of moral courage’. It’s said that he particularly objected to the movement’s battle cry – ‘Long live death!’ He was forced out of the university once more and orders were given by Franco for his execution. In the end, however, he was placed under house arrest and died soon after.

Unamuno’s life gives an important context for our poem. He knew what it meant to live in the face of threatened death and the eclipse of meaning, to give yourself to something without any guarantee of the future. And yet in the face of such potentially

paralyzing circumstances, he brooks no self-pity, no curling up in the foetal position and sucking your thumb. 'Shake off this sadness, and recover your spirit'. If you're moping, self-indulgent and 'sluggish', you'll never live out your destiny – never 'see the wheel of fate that brushes your heel as it turns going by'.

Unamuno knows that being fully alive, someone 'in whom life is abundant', means giving yourself to life. If you don't, then you'll just be 'giving food to that final pain which is slowly winding you in the nets of death'. 'That final pain' is, perhaps, the temptation to despair that sucks the joy out of life. Or perhaps, as critic Roger Housden suggests, it's the pain of 'a life not fully lived, one ... shrouded in regrets over what might have been'.<sup>1</sup> And so the question Unamuno poses is this: what are you going to feed in your life? What are you going to nourish? Despair, regret, death? Or life? If it's life you want, he says, you need to get to work: 'to live is to work, and the only thing which lasts is the work; start then, turn to the work'.

I wonder how this line strikes you? In our culture, I think it's hard to hear – so many of us feel that we *do* live to work and it's not a good thing. In fact, our chronic overwork is something death-dealing in our lives. But I don't think that's what Unamuno is recommending. Rather when he speaks of 'the work', he's talking about what we're here for, the life that's ours to live, the things we're called to be faithful to no matter how unpromising the circumstances, how futile our efforts can seem. Sometimes our 'work' may involve our job – how we earn our living; but it might equally involve our vocations as parents, lovers or friends, our creativity, our faith. As we age, our 'work' might involve becoming reconciled to our lives, seeking out healing, practising acceptance and blessing. So what he's saying essentially is not, 'get back to the factory floor', but 'get on with it', turn to what you're called to.

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Housden, *Ten Poems to Set You Free* (New York: Harmony Books, 2003), p.45.

There are times, of course, when to keep going with our 'work' (even in this broader sense) seems impossible. Sometimes life strikes us a debilitating blow, and we are left exhausted and broken-hearted, unable to recover our spirits or shake off our sadness simply by an act of will. Again, I don't think we're to read Unamuno as denying our suffering and times of incapacity, as requiring us to approach life with a permanently and unshakably stiff upper lip. But there is something bracing and unsentimental in this poem that I have found deeply empowering even in my times of struggle. He's calling us to refuse to indulge ourselves endlessly, to let ourselves wallow our whole lives in the mire of our fears, disappointments and heart-break. 'The only which lasts is the work; start then, turn to the work'. Leunig's beautiful little poem, 'How to Get There' has something of the same spirit:

Go through the gate and head straight out towards the horizon.  
Keep going towards the horizon.  
Sit down and have a rest every now and again,  
But keep on going, just keep on with it.  
Keep on going as far as you can.  
That's how you get there.

And *how* must we keep going? In what spirit must we give ourselves to our work? 'Throw yourself like seed as you walk, and into your own field'. That is, give yourself – without remainder, without safety net – into the life that is yours, 'your own field'. Don't just sow some seeds in some field over there – observing from a safe distance to see if they'll grow. Rather *become* seed, be a whole-hearted commitment; don't turn your face for (again) that is to 'turn it to death', and do not let the past weigh down your motion. I hear echoes in this of Jesus' saying: 'No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God' (Luke 9:62).

It's a powerful call. Jesus' words are described as a 'hard' saying. Often, I think, we do try to hedge our bets. We think if we withhold something of ourselves, we're somehow a bit safer, more in control. Speaking of this temptation in the context of

meditation, for example, John Main said: 'What we try to do is to maintain observation points, base camps along every stage of our development. Each of these little camps is an outpost of the central H.Q. of the ego'.<sup>2</sup> But Unamuno is onto the key paradox that is the secret of abundant life. 'Very truly, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit' (John 12:24). Or, as that great 'spiritual teacher' Judi Dench so wisely expressed it in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, it's like being in the surf – as long as we resist the waves, trying to stay in control on the edge, we remain separate from the greater life. Only by diving in, going under, do we come out swimming freely on the other side.

Of course, to give ourselves wholly – to another person, to a vocation, to our own healing, or to live out the truth as best we discern it – this can lead us into some difficult and vulnerable places. For Unamuno it led to exile and ultimately death; for us, sometimes, it can lead to experiences of loss and betrayal, to being misunderstood and into dark nights of the soul where we lose the self we thought we knew, the life we thought was ours. A seed thrown into a furrow is covered by the earth, and does not control the process of its own germination and emergence into the light. Yet it's as if the deepest fruitfulness can only be wrought in us as, by faith, we dare entrust ourselves to what is beyond us. And perhaps this is because, as poet David Whyte has said: 'What you can plan is too small for you to live. What you can live wholeheartedly will make plans enough for the vitality hidden in your sleep'.<sup>3</sup>

Yet for all its vulnerability, Unamuno promises that a life lived this way won't be dissipated like 'a group of clouds'; 'from your work you will be able one day to gather yourself'. I think that's true. But the gathering is itself gift – it cannot be grasped at or achieved, and sometimes it may only be realized eschatologically, beyond death. For we

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<sup>2</sup> John Main *Monastery Without Walls: The Spiritual Letters of John Main*, ed. Laurence Freeman (Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 2006), p.216.

<sup>3</sup> David Whyte, 'What to Remember When Waking'.

are participating by faith in an unfolding mystery that radically transcends what we can possess or see whole. Our task is generously and without self-indulgence, to give ourselves to it, to turn away from self-concern and towards 'the work', or as St Paul put it: 'Set your minds on things that are above ... for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory' (Col. 3: 2-4).