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The Little Duck (Matthew 11:28-30)

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Read poem: <http://cathy-edgett.livejournal.com/2136552.html>

I discovered in the process of preparing this week's reflection that this delightful and deceptively simple poem comes in a number of versions. Written by Donald C. Babcock, a professor of philosophy at the University of New Hampshire, it was originally published (as a considerably longer piece) in the *New Yorker* magazine in 1947. The poem turns up on the internet in other forms too, and I couldn't discover anything about the relative authority or provenance of these later, shortened versions. But the version we've just read is the one I first came across and it remains my favourite. With incredible economy and simplicity, it evokes some of the fundamental dynamics of the spiritual life – so I thought it was a fitting poem to conclude our *Poetica Divina* series.

From the outset, the poet alerts us to the need to pay attention: 'Now we are ready to look at something pretty special'. It's well known, of course, that the readiness to look and the willingness to see things in a new light are necessary dispositions for spiritual awakening. But what I appreciate is how the poem draws us towards these dispositions gently, as if it trusts us to be up for the work. The tone is neither vaguely threatening, as in 'repent or perish'; nor overly exhorting and muscular, as in 'stay awake'; it's more an invitation to remember who we are – people who are right now 'ready to look at something pretty special'.

Yet then comes the delightful subversion of expectation. The 'something pretty special' turns out, at first glance, to be something pretty ordinary: a duck riding in the ocean a long way away, a hundred feet beyond the surf. What's so special about that? Well, for one thing, the poet is reminding us that, for those with eyes to see, everything is 'pretty special'. And for another, the duck's way of being

way out there beyond the surf has something to teach us, something to reveal to us about the spiritual life.

The Atlantic is a pretty forbidding ocean – brooding, dark and, on this day, ‘there is a big heaving’ of the waves. The little duck must be dwarfed in the face of the vastness rising and falling around him. But not only does he seem unconcerned; he ‘*cuddles* in the swells’. It’s as if he embraces where he is, tender in the midst. There is a big heaving in the Atlantic. But he’s not resisting anything. And so, the poet says, he is part of it, he belongs. More than that – ‘he can rest while the Atlantic heaves, because he rests in the Atlantic’. The poem brings out the wondrous juxtaposition of the restlessness of the ocean and the rest that remains possible for the duck.

As a metaphor for the spiritual life, this image is rich. In the Judaeo-Christian imagination, the ocean signifies chaos – the forces of disorder that threaten to overwhelm the bounds within which our lives are secured. The ocean can also signify the unfathomable abyss of God’s own being, and the sense that to be whelmed over by God is very like being plunged into the deep waters of chaos. As the psalmist cries: ‘Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waters: all your waves and breakers have gone over me’ (Ps.42:9). In the face of this oceanic transcendence of both God and chaos, our puny existence, like the duck’s, is towered over by forces we have no capacity to contain, by storms we cannot master. *Our* inclination, when we realise our situation, is to panic or struggle. Yet – the duck does neither of these things. For there he is, far out from shore, cuddling in the swells, and at rest. He’s in communion, at one with the whole.

You might object that there’s no great feat of courage or spiritual maturity required here, for the duck. He can float – and what’s more, ‘Probably he doesn’t know how large the ocean is’. But actually, says the poet, ‘neither do you’. And in fact, *knowing* isn’t the point. The issue is ‘realising it’, experiencing the present reality of that in which we live and move and have our being. This, the duck does. How? ‘He sits down in it’ – and this line invites me to *feel*, as if from the inside, his

little feathered breast relaxed, the weight of his small, buoyant body wholly entrusted to the water. The duck, in other words, lets himself be where he is, 'reposing in the immediate as if it were infinity – which it is'. And this (says the poet) 'is religion'. Babcock – whose 1908 masters thesis was titled: 'The Origins and Development of Religious Experience' – here evokes the root meaning of 'religion' as to 'bind' or 're-connect'. The duck is connected wholly to the whole; he reposes without reservation in the infinity of the given, the infinity of this present moment.

But is this really *our* religion? Exactly what religion *does* this little duck practice? His radical presence to and acceptance of the given may seem more Buddhist than Christian, more to do with 'The Power of Now' than the gospel's call to build a new heaven and a new earth where, as the Book of Revelation has it, 'the sea is no more' (Rev. 21:1). Is it possible the little duck's approach to life risks collapsing into fatalism? Does being unflappably at rest in the midst of whatever chaos heaves about you, lead to avoidance of the prophetic struggle for justice and change?

Well, my sense is there *can* be risks in a spirituality focused on simply being in and of the 'present moment', just as there can be risks in a future-oriented spirituality focused on challenging the status quo, creating a 'better' world. The first can degenerate into unhealthy quietism and disengagement; the second can degenerate into unhealthy activism and an inability to celebrate and be with what is. But the truth is, these two strands need not be opposed and at the deepest level, they are one.

Jesus calls his disciples to active and engaged lives: to follow him to the ends of the earth, proclaiming the coming kingdom of God, liberation for the oppressed and good news for the poor (Luke 4:18). In this sense, he does draw us beyond the given and into the future. But he also says 'the kingdom of God is within you, the kingdom of God is among you'. He offers the non-anxious receptive existence of the 'birds of the air' and 'lilies of the field' as models for how to live (Matt. 6:28), and calls all who are weary and heavy laden to come to him, that we might find rest for

our souls. To think of these two strands as mutually exclusive alternatives is a false dualism.

For the paradox in the life of prayer is that the more fully we are present, here and now, the more deeply we 'repose' in the infinity of the immediate, the more we encounter the energy of compassion alive in our hearts. And it is this very energy that fires us to lives of service and active love, to join in the liberating mission of God's Spirit and the fulfilment of God's future. In deep prayer, 'now' and 'not yet' are two sides of one coin, two aspects of realising God's dream on earth. This is the truth revealed in the contemplative way.

So, Babcock's little duck, we might say, is a contemplative. He starts where he is and he deepens what he already has. In the words of Thomas Merton, for him as for us 'everything has been given to us in Christ. All we need is to experience what we already possess'. This, I think, is why our poet likes the little duck and recognises in him the realisation of our own deepest possibility. 'He doesn't know much. But he has religion'.