

Seeing Differently: Revision, Renewal, and Recreation



Patricia Patrick

Associate Professor of English for the Faculty of Arts & Letters

Devotional

June 18, 2019

The end of a semester can be a tired time, full of work and worry. Near the end of a challenging semester in graduate school, I met one of my classmates who, in contrast to most of us, was striding along with a radiant look on his face. He told me he had been for a swim to “refresh his ideas.” A little recreation turned his day around, and his original description of his swim “refreshing his ideas,” cheered me up. I am not going to suggest we all get up and go swimming right now, although it did occur to me that it would be a good idea. But, instead, I want to talk about some ways of refreshing our ideas without going all the way to the beach. That is, through spiritual kinds of recreation, the re-creation of our world and ourselves that becomes possible when we see differently. I will focus on renewing our appreciation of our wondrous world, rethinking who our brothers and sisters are, and opening our spiritual senses.

One of my heroes of renewal is Gerard Manley Hopkins, a poet and Catholic priest. He wrote a sonnet called “God's Grandeur” that takes a revisionary look at the mess we might have made of the world. So, one thing you will notice about the poem is that it divided into two parts. His poem is divided into eight lines and then six lines. The first eight lines set up a situation. When we get to the last six, we have something that’s called a turn. That turn is literally a kind of “turning around,” turning back to look at things differently. In Hopkins’ sacred poem, it’s actually related to the idea of conversion. So, what we’re going to look for in Hopkins’ poem is “let's look at this differently; there is a creative, hopeful, and renewing way to think about this.”

Hopkins is writing during the Industrial Revolution, a time that brought exciting advances in trade and travel, but also the darkening of the skies with coal smoke. In the first eight lines, Hopkins mourns that we have lost the Garden of Eden because we have become obsessed with getting our living by the sweat of our brow. He writes,

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

First all Hopkins says that God's presence fills the earth like electricity, like the sparks that fly from shaken metal. The divine beauty of the world flows like lustrous olive oil fresh from the olive press. So, Hopkins wonders, *Why do we just walk all over that beauty? Why do we harm the earth and trample our own as well spirits in our quest for temporal gain? How can we just plod along full of world-weariness?* The second part of the poem offers another way to see this situation.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

In the second part of the poem, Hopkins offers hope. I'm not saying that works don't matter when we're taking care of the earth, but having the faith to see that they will matter, that they will be supported by the earth, is important. The Lord has written renewal into the book of nature. Day returns after night, spring follows winter, birds return from migration. The poem ends with a metaphor that also invites another kind of fresh look. Hopkins has pictured the Holy Ghost as a mother bird, sheltering the world with love and bringing sunrise on its wings. This is also a poem about the renewing power of redemption in human lives. But first, I'm going to look at taking a renewing look on the world: the renewing look that Hopkins has invited us to take.

Hopkins exhorts a bent world to stand up and look to the heavens, to see every morning as a rebirth of the world and ourselves. In the words of a hymn made immortal by Cat Stevens, “Morning has broken like the first morning...” Every sunrise is a time for seeing the world created anew and for seeing the Lord's hand in the creation. The Psalmist writes: “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament declareth his handywork” (Psalms 19:2). In the Doctrine and Covenants we get another majestic view of the heavens: “The earth rolls upon her wings, and the sun giveth its light by day, and the moon giveth her light by night, and they roll upon their wings in their glory, in the midst of the power of God” (D&C 88:45).

This scripture invites us to trade our world-weary plodding for the wings of an eternal perspective. Another intriguing thing about this passage is the pronouns. In English, where nouns do not have gender, it's unusual to call the earth or the moon a “she.” This scripture describes earth and the moon as beings who feel and know, who are choosing to share their light and engaging in a flight full of order and beauty.

Thinking about the sun, moon, and stars not as scenery on the stage of our lives but as fellow actors opens a renewing perspective of attention and love to the rest of creation. In the beginning of the world God brought all the animals to human beings in order receive names. Such naming is not necessarily about dominating nature. Perhaps God brought all creation to the first humans for names because he meant us to know them individually. Naming the animals, and plants, and minerals of the world can be an alert, nurturing, loving way of seeing. Naming involves us in a kind of re-creation that transforms a chaos without form to a living world richly inhabited with individual and wondrous beings. In his book *Landmarks*, Robert Macfarlane collects names for storms, winds, waves, mountains and more because “Words act as compass; place-speech serves literally to en-charm the land – to sing it back in being” (22). Naming the creation takes us again to the bright birth of the world, where as we name the other creatures one by one, we recognize the variety and the wonders of God's creation.

Knowing the names can sharpen the focus on our lens of perception. Even dirt is amazing. McFarland quotes John Muir on taking a closer look at the ground in the Sierra Nevada: “The surface of the ground, so dull and forbidding at first sight . . . in fact shines and sparkles with crystals: mica, hornblende, feldspar, quartz, tourmaline” (11). Muir is able “to see dazzle where most of us would see dullness” because he has words that give focus and definition (McFarlane 11).

Try that out here in Hawaii. The word *forest* gives us a general, hazy, green mental picture. When the focus words sharpen to ohia, ieie, and hapu'u, we can see the bristly red flowers waving in the breeze, orange-flowered vines tangling in the trees, or giant ferns climbing up the ridges. The beach is populated with naupaka, ironwoods, and tree heliotrope. A closer look at these beach plants reveals the unique half-flowers of the naupaka and the tiny but elegant blooms on the tree, heliotrope. Knowing the names and looking closer are doors to that open to a new, richer landscape. There are soundscapes and scentscapes to explore as well. Although roosters are the loudest things in morning, there are a number of voices chorusing in the sunrise. One of the virtuosi of the songbird world, greeting hikers and walkers in our mountains and parks with showoff trills.

As we change our vision to look both closer and wider, we re-create a richer world full of individuals worth getting to know. All kinds of knowledge can offer us the recreation of re-creation. T. H. White puts this memorably in *The Once and Future King* when the wizard Merlin advises the young Arthur that “The best thing for being sad ... is to learn something. Look at what a lot of things there are to learn.” Section 88 of *The Doctrine and Covenants* gives us an inspiring list of things to learn: “things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad” (118). The scripture is an invitation to explore a world of inexhaustible variety.

I'm going to focus on one of these things, learning languages and how learning them transforms the way we see each other and the world. If knowing the names of things expands our vision a bit, knowing that there are more names, even some more wonderful names, for things expands our vision even further. I know only a few words in Hawaiian, but even those have been transformative. There is a little tree up in the Hawaii's drier mountains, and also in some of our parking lots, called the alahe'e. That name breaks down into scent and octopus, meaning something like the scent slithers off the trees as octopus arms slither through the ocean (Hall 50). Colette Leimomi Akana has collected more than two hundred pages of Hawaiian names for different kinds of rain. Nihipali, is a rain that sneaks (nihi) around the cliffs (pali), p?'ai hale rain encircles (p?'ai) houses (hale), a k'hikohala rain “adorns the hala trees” (Akana 234, 207, 46). These are names that enable us perceive the beauty and the intricacy of our world, to see a lot more variations in the rain. These names also give us a sense of what is important to the namers. Learning languages thus allows us to see the world more closely, more sharply, and it allows us to see more fully into the hearts and minds of the people who speak them, to appreciate the way they construct the world, to understand the things that do not translate. The language-learning we do as students and missionaries is one of the keys to being the peace-makers that David O. McKay envisioned us becoming. And I hope we'll take the amazing opportunity that we have here to talk to people in their native languages.

Even the supposedly dead languages still matter. I get quite a lot of teasing about my interest in Greek and Latin: those languages that I'm going to use to converse with dead Romans on the other side. As members of the Church, we know that the dead matter. We do work for them. Learning their languages is about the way brothers and sisters constructed reality. They also reveal the deep roots of some of our present-day thinking, and these old words can even generate renewed ideas and renewed lives. I have been learning to read the *New Testament* in Greek this year. Since I am still wrestling with conjugations and learning vocabulary, I read really, really slowly. This is also the place where I give you some advice. Keep up with your piano practice, keep up with your languages! I'm spending most of my middle age trying to get back to reading Greek as well as I used to read Greek, for instance. But, this slow reading and slow learning makes me think about points I would otherwise fly quickly over, because I'm familiar with the scriptures. In Luke 1:78, Zacharias rejoices over the birth of Christ. He says, “the dayspring from on high hath visited us.” The Greek word that the renaissance translators beautifully rendered as dayspring is *anatole*, literally rising or dawn. Zacharias is making a metaphor that reminds us that Christ came to give us life and hope, just as the sun returns after the night. Like Hopkins, he reminds us that divinity is a work in the world, bringing love and light in its wings every day. The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*, which literally means changing one's mind. Repentance involves engaging in a deep transformation that begins with changing our perspective. We see differently. Like the other wondrous kinds of re-visions and re-thinkings the rest of this talk has been about, repentance is also a renewal and re-creation.

The word metanoia invites rethinking not only about repentance, but also about forgiveness. It can be tempting to see forgiveness and repentance as binary opposites: on one hand, one person sorrowfully repents, and on the other, a person graciously forgives them. This thinking is related to another binary we sometimes create when we see justice and mercy as opposites. If we see justice as the punishment people deserve, and mercy as a lucky escape from such justice. But forgiveness may not be not so much the opposite of repentance as itself kind of repentance. That is, forgiveness involves re-thinking about someone else, repenting of our limited view of them. The French philosopher Simone Weil defines justice as seeing differently:

Justice. To be ever ready to admit that another person is something quite different from what we read when he is there (or when we think about him). Or rather, to read in him that he is certainly something different, perhaps something completely different from what we read in him. Every being cries out silently to be read differently” (Gravity and Grace, 88).

Weil tells us that justice is not judging but changing our thinking.. Forgiving actually often involves repenting of our narrow vision of the person we thought we would graciously forgive. When we discard our preconceptions, we are more able to more fully, and thus more justly, appreciate the reality of another human being.

As Hopkins writes in the poem my husband shared in the introduction, seeing the reality of another human being allows us to recognize that Christ “plays in ten thousand places, /Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his To the Father through the features of men’s faces.” That is that we see we all belong to Christ's family. C.S. Lewis also tells us that the true vision of our brothers and sisters is awe-inspiring: **[slide 11]**

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree helping each other to one or the other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all of our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. (C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*)

We often hear that we need to forgive for own peace of mind and that what we think of others neither helps or hinders them, but this is not entirely true. How we think of others, and therefore how we treat them, can make change harder or it can give them encouragement to grow. In her wonderfully titled *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Rebecca Solnit argues that we are all traveling a difficult road to transformation. In this context justice is a “far more complicated and incalculable thing than we often imagine, . . . if everything is to come out right in the end, then the end is farther away than anticipated and far harder to estimate.” She describes an artist friend who thus “drew a group around a a campfire as her picture of justice, saying that justice is helping each other on the journey” (21).

At the beginning of this term, President and Sister Tanner told stories about helping others on their journey. I won't retell the stories, but I wanted to emphasize how they both helped someone to take an eternal perspective, to see themselves as potential deities rather than mere mortals. When Sister Tanner came to get her wayward brother back from a questionable party, she also brought him to his true self. She said, "I remember pouring out my love for him and sharing my knowledge of who he was as a child of God." She said, "I want you to be true to who you really are."

When President Tanner approached a companion who had been using his splits to spend time with a young woman, he could have felt justified in calling his companion to judgment, in labeling him as rebellious, disobedient, or careless. Instead he gave him an opportunity to change his perspective, to see his situation in an eternal light.

I asked him if he really loved the girl. He did. I asked him if he wanted to marry her. He did. In the temple. Yes. In a way that could be celebrated by his parents and hers, both of whom were leaders in the Church. Yes, he said.

President Tanner invited his companion to trade a temporary, damaging label for an eternal identity as beloved son and brother, loving husband. The Tanners described persons that became helps and inspirations to them as well, people from whom they also drew strength and inspiration, relationships that involved lifting each other. Forgiveness does not draw lines, it gathers brothers and sisters to the campfires, to the warmth of eternal family and the light of knowing who they are.

The last renewing perspective that I want to discuss is another kind of eternal vision, our awareness of the unseen. **[slide 12]** In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes: "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2:9-10). One of those unseen things that the Spirit reveals is hope for future, that there are blessings to come. Another is comfort for now, the real but often unrecognized presence of our guardian angels, our loving heavenly family. In the Old Testament, a king of Syria is going into battle with a troubled heart because he sees how vastly outnumbered his own forces are. The prophet Elisha reassures him, "Fear not: they that be with use are more than they that be with them." And the king's spiritual eyes are opened to see the mountain filled with heavenly hosts (2 Kings 6.16-17). We too can have our minds opened to the hosts that surround us. Last semester I had an especially gray day. I was sick with the flu, worried about the seemingly endless and unresolvable trials faced by my loved ones, and discouraged about my work. I sat in my office replaying the film of woe. As I reran one particularly awful scene, I got a surprise. This time through the scene included a presence standing by me, resting a reassuring hand on my shoulder. The surprise shook me out of my bleak mood. I was reminded in that moment that there is so much more to reality than I imagine. As one of our hymns reminds us, "O know you not that angels are near you." (Orson Pratt Huish, "Come unto Jesus," Hymn 117). I remembered other occasions when I felt the presence of a loved one from the spirit world. This unseen world is real. Even though we have trials, the Lord, his angels, and our loved ones are near to us and concerned. We can take strength and renewal in opening our spiritual sense to that world, remembering that that we are known, loved, and cheered on.

In conclusion, I bear my testimony that we do have a Heavenly Family that who has given us a beautiful world, the opportunity to become better than we imagine, the blessing of lifting each other to our incredible potential, and the comfort of throngs of angels who are there to cheer us.

Works Cited

Akana, Collette Leimoni. *H?nau Ka Ua: Hawaiian Rain Names*. Kamehameha Publishing, 2015.

Hall, Stewart. *A Hikers' Guide to Trailside Plants in Hawaii*. Mutual Publishing, 2004.

Lewis, C. S. *The Weight of Glory*. Quotation located on Goodreads.

Macfarlane, Robert. *Landmarks*. Penguin, 2016.

Solnit, Rebecca. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. Penguin, 2006.

Weil, Simone. *Gravity and Grace*. G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1952.

White, T. H. *The Once and Future King*. Project Gutenberg Canada, 2015.