

Cracked Cups

May 17, 2020

“Maggie’s taking care of a man who’s dying.” Mark Doty tells the story in his poem, “Brilliance.”

“He’s attended to everything, said goodbye to his parents, paid off his credit card. She says *Why don’t you just run it up to the limit?*

but he wants everything squared away, no balance owed, though he misses the pets he’s already found a home for -- he can’t be around dogs or cats, too much risk.

He says, *I can’t have anything.*

She says, *A bowl of goldfish?*

He says he doesn’t want to start with anything

and then describes the kind he’d maybe like, how their tails would fan to a gold flaring. They talk about hot jewel tones, gold lacquer, say maybe they’ll go pick some out though he can’t do much of anywhere and then abruptly he says

I can’t love anything I can’t finish.

He says it like he’d had enough of the whole scintillant world, though what he means is he’ll never be satisfied and therefore has established this discipline, a kind of severe rehearsal.

That’s where they leave it, him looking out the window, her knitting as she does because she needs to do something.

Later he leaves a message: *Yes to the bowl of goldfish.*

Meaning: let me go, if I have to, in brilliance...”

You know, we’re all dying here, each in our quiet, mysterious (even to ourselves), own way. The question is, will we go (and our whole lives are a long, drawn out process of “going”) -- will we go, as we go, “in brilliance?” In brilliance or bitterness? In brilliance or fear? Will we live our lives, such as they are, such as the cards have been dealt us, in brilliance and gratitude, love, curiosity, wonder, benevolence, a sense of adventure, and calm, or not? Like Like Maggie’s friend, we’re all susceptible to this longing to have everything squared away, all the time, with no loose ends and no unknowns. Even if we have every reason to believe that we’ve got years ahead of us, we’re all susceptible to this small, tight, bitter foreclosure : “I can’t have anything. Too much risk.” *I can’t love anything I can’t finish.* We’re all susceptible, perhaps especially now: if things fall apart, a little or a lot, sometimes we shut down. “If I can’t have it all, I don’t want anything,” we say. Not in every moment, not every time, but sometimes we say, sometimes aloud, but usually not, “I’m too afraid. Everything is out of my control. I can’t see what’s coming next, and I’m not sure I want to see. I have no choices and no power. This is all

the life there is for me. I'm scared. I'm done." Not literally maybe, but done with creativity and curiosity and hope, the risk of joy.

All our lives, we're balancing our expectations for our lives, or for the day, against reality, balancing what we want and expect and maybe feel entitled to against things as they are, circumstances that we can't control, and every day we decide what to make of the space in between, the gap between what we want and what in the moment is actually possible. It's an art, it's a craft, how you hold that. It's the shaping of your character.

In these pandemic days we're all trying to feel our way through so much uncertainty now, about money, family, school, safety, graduation, travel, wellness, illness, mental illness, depression and anxiety, loneliness, work that used to feel worthy and important, work that used to feel secure, the prospect of no work at all. I feel like Maggie's dying friend in the poem sometimes, more comfortable in the ever-shrinking world of what I know for sure and what I can control, than in the brighter, beckoning world of larger possibilities that might or might not ever come to pass. We've become masters of risk management, tempering our plans and dreams, dimming our imagination. Sometimes this is prudent, but it's not how we're designed as humans; our minds and hearts are built for dreaming big.

Sometimes, these days, it's hard to see the difference between "everything is lost" and "everything is changing" – but they are not the same.

Mark Doty wrote his poem almost thirty years ago, in the midst of the AIDS epidemic. His own partner died in that time, and so many thousands more, tens of thousands more. It was a time, in some ways, like this time we're in right now, when we were so bewildered and frightened and anxious and angry at no one in particular and sometimes at each other and always at elected leaders, from the White House on down, who counted the losses and played the political odds, and decided then as now, that some of our citizens, our beautiful people, were utterly expendable, that some vast number of beloveds would just have to die for money and greed, or by negligence or outright, homophobic, racist disregard. It was a very different time, but not in every way. We learned a lot then, one by one and as a country, what happens to us under pressure, where the cracks and flaws are in our systems, and our character, and also where we shine. How we shine. How we shine together, such a mighty light. How we say to one another, brazenly, "Are you okay? You seem despondent. Have you thought about a bowl of goldfish?"

At the church I served out east back then I remember a span of weeks one year when we lost 3 members all in a row, beautiful men: a singer in the choir, a teacher, the chair of the Finance Committee, and there were others in those years. I remember visiting John in the hospital, whose husband had died a few months before. Not long after his own diagnosis, John bought not a bowl of goldfish, but a red Miata – a way of saying to himself, first, and to all the world, "I intend to live in brilliance. Try and stop me." And it was not a frivolous decision nor a selfish impulse. He made a plan to leave it to his niece, who had no money for a car and needed one for work. He let her pick it out. In the hospital he said to me, "We're not heroes, Victoria. Don't ever call us that. We're not heroes and we're also not victims, and we're not martyrs. We are not to be pitied or revered. We're just people, your family, and we're all beautiful and we're all a bit of a mess, just like you. And if you can understand that if our church can understand that it will

be a better church.” And he was right and that was true. We all are only just people, just trying to help each other live a brilliant life.

In April, I read about a woman making masks. There’s something about this new crafting, this 21st century cottage industry, this sound, if you listen of sewing machines humming in your neighborhood - so beautiful and simple, such honest, good work, hundreds and thousands of cloth masks lovingly stitched, freely given away, the way people knitted socks and vests in World War I or rolled bandages and blankets. We are finding ways to touch each other: someone’s hand to the cloth, and that cloth to someone else’s face; even with lots of washing and drying in between to disinfect the transaction, it’s still intimate and sanctified. A few weeks ago I read about a woman doing this in San Francisco. Gert McMullen has made thousands of masks since mid-March, on a trusty old sewing machine in a corner of the warehouse where, for three decades, she has curated the AIDS Memorial Quilt. Since the 1980’s when with a group of friends she stitched the quilt’s first two panels, she has nurtured that project so that now there are 49,000 panels, each 3 feet by six, holding 94,000 names of people who have died of HIV. It’s too big now to be displayed in its entirety, but when sections of it go on tour, she often travels with them, all over the world, and back at home she keeps it all in order, catalogued on floor-to-ceiling shelves, and still receives new panels. She’s given her whole life to it.

As this new plague has advanced, Gert says she could have hunkered down, could have looked away, weary now of so much death and sadness. She said it never occurred to her the first time around that she would spend her whole life sewing for a cause, and in her 60’s now, a big part of her is just ready to rest. But instead, she’s gathering the scraps, the yards and yards of extra cloth people sent with their panels to mend holes and fix tears, giving the fabric new life, sending all these the colors and textures and wild 80’sprints out into the world as masks.

The panels of the AIDS quilt were sewn from the old denim shirts and T shirts and dress shirts and pajamas and pants of the people who died, their police uniforms and graduation robes, clerical stoles and bowties and bathing suits. The stockings and sequined gowns of drag queens, and handkerchiefs and baseball caps, ripped apart, just like the people’s lives, and stitched again into new beauty – and now, yet again. In San Francisco, at one hospital, a young nurse caring now for Covid patients says he knows the mask he wears may be made from a shirt worn by someone who died on his same unit 35 years ago, maybe the year he was born. He says his older co-workers can’t believe it when they see those masks come in. It’s like something holy when they put them on.

Our theme this month is “Imperfection – the practice of shining,” a theme chosen almost a year ago, at the end of last May, when we had no idea how imperfect life could get, how glitches and flaws in the systems we thought we could count on would be exposed for what they are – broken, racist, insufficient, cruel, how our own imperfections would all be exposed (sometimes on Zoom webinars, who knows who watching it live). And John was right years ago: most of us are not heroes. Some of you are, that’s for sure – but are not heroes or victims or martyrs. We’re just people, trying to make our way, our imperfect way, through this imperfect world, just trying to keep on the sunny side, always on the sunny side, not in rosy denial, but denial’s opposite, the side of life and love, despite what we’ve seen, despite disappointment, despite whatever expectations we once had for history’s unfolding.

“Imperfection” is a great theme, partly because it’s finally one that I know something about – much better, in my case, than “reverence” or “grace” or any of these other lofty, aspirational themes that I flunked in seminary and don’t live out so well. I’m an expert on imperfection – but you know, then I thought about it and realized, actually, I’m not; I’m an expert on perfectionism, which is humble imperfection’s evil twin. I could tell you story’s about it’s terrible cost, the damage it does to one’s spirit, the way that you look, not just at yourself, but at other people and at this whole world. It’s like Maggie’s friend in the poem, “If I can’t have it all and just right, then I want nothing,” and that is no way to die or to live.

It’s time to let that go. What better time than this pandemic time to let go of any expectation that this world of this life owes us any perfection, or any great joy without sadness and loss and loss of control? It’s time to let go (what better time?) of any expectation that we ourselves can be or should try to be superstars of efficiency, efficacy or equilibrium. Take a breath and let that go, It doesn’t matter if you’ve cut your hair or combed your hair or swept your floor or made your bed or figured out completely how to pay your bills on unemployment (how could you, so soon, with so many unknowns?). It doesn’t matter if you kid can’t sit still for hours in front of an iPad for school, or if you haven’t yet mastered all the recipes your Facebook friends are posting, nor even one, nor even if you’ve done a single thing on whatever list you have today. Take a breath and let it go, and resolve that that the one thing you’ll try to accomplish today is noticing the greening world, the flowering out there, the gentle spring that found you here in the midst of this catastrophe, as it finds you every year, no matter how you hide. What matters is that we love as best we can, imperfectly, the scintillant world, and each other and ourselves, and cut everyone and everything we meet a little slack. I believe that that right there is the doctrine of Universalism.

Certain activities call out for a kind of perfection: we appreciate perfection in the work of surgeons, for example, or the pilots of airplanes, or violinists in a string quartet. But even surgeons come home at night and binge on Netflix and Doritos; even pilots use the wrong dryer setting sometimes, and shrink their stiff white shirts with the fancy epaulets, and they parent their children imperfectly and forget to call their mothers; and even virtuoso violinists cheat on their workouts because they’re just too damn tired, or get their taxes in late, and forget six out of seven items on the grocery list because it felt so anxious in the store, and break down sobbing on the couch for no apparent reason till sometime mops them up and tells them it’s ok and they’re ok. Perfection has its place, but it’s a pretty small, irrelevant place in most of our lives. For most of us, it has no rightful place at all. Our own inherent imperfections fit perfectly, in fact, with the crazy imperfections of our circumstances.

It was years ago in the midst of the AIDS epidemic, when I first read in Mark Doty’s memoir a letter of condolence on the death of his partner, from a friend who wrote about *kisogi*, the Japanese cups mended with gold:

“What I’m working up to say is how sorry I was to hear about Wally. I didn’t know him, but I’ve heard what a tremendous person he was... I think of those ancient Japanese ceramic cups, rustic in appearance, [one of them] the property at some point of a holy monk, one of the few possessions he allowed himself. In a later century, someone dropped and broke the cup, but it

was too precious simply to throw away. So it was repaired not with glue, which never really holds, but with a seam of gold solder, making visible and beautiful a part of its history..."

Mark Doty then reflected on that image:

What was can't be restored; I can neither have Wally back in the flesh, nor return to the self I inhabited before his death. The vessel's not cracked but broken, all the way through, permanently.

The break, from now on, is an inescapable part of who I am, perhaps the inescapable part. But who can live, day by day, in pieces? Loss shatters us first, but then what? This metaphor offers possibility: to honor the part of oneself that's irreparable. Not to apologize for it, disguise it, not try to mend it in any seamless way. Studying the cup, the viewers might see the rupture first; to fill the crack with gold means to allow the break prominence, to let it shine. Broken, ongoing, we see at once what it was and what it is. Wearing its history, the old cup with its gilt scars becomes, I imagine, a treasure of another sort, whole in its fragmentation, more deeply itself, veined with the evidence of time.

We're all cracked cups, never more than now: vessels of unspeakable value, bruised and damaged through and through, by definition, as humans. In this cracked-up, crazy time we're in, this not-so-perfect moment, we're most of us neither heroes nor victims, but just people- family, siblings - shining through with all our vulnerabilities, and occasional strength, our fears and anxieties, leaning as we're able toward our loves and hopes. Perfectionism isolates – and God knows, we're lonely enough as it is right now. Anchor on the people you love, the truths you know, the communities, like this one, that will not let you go. Together, said Mark Doty, writing out of deepest grief and toward imperfect but sufficient joy,

We are the elements of the world's consciousness of itself, and thus we are necessary: replaceable and irreplaceable at once. Someone will take our places, but then again there will never be anyone like us, no one who will see quite this way. We are a sudden flowering of seeing, among millions of such blossomings. Like the innumerable tiny stars on the branching stalk of the sea lavender: it takes how many – a thousand? – to construct this violet sheen, this little shaking cloud of flowers.