

There Is No Escape From Telling. Edward Curtin

Students are being denied the rich heritage of words, images, and music that form the basis of Western culture.

By [Edward Curtin](#)

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By the lake's lapping shore above the town and the railroad tracks, my wife and I stopped and marveled, struck stone silent by two dazzling Baltimore Orioles, clawed together as they tumbled, wrestling in the green morning breeze above our heads. They perched upon a branch and sang a morning hymn, an ode to joy and the spring's morning glory. Their black and orange throats vibrated amid the green quaking aspen's leaves as the lake's low lapping sounds lent counterpoint. They were sublime.

I too felt a quake, a shiver down my spine as associations tumbled through my mind. Poems, songs, memories of other early morning walks in spring. Intoxication, elation, the horripilation that accompanies spring's rising, the sexual excitement. Hope, and the loose feeling of being forever young. No solution to anything, just reverence for existence. Nothing changed, except a few years.

In quickly putting into words what I felt a half-hour ago, I drew on a vast store of personal and cultural memories that came to me with little thought as I was walking home. Words strung together without thinking. You have just read them. I felt impelled to tell them.

Now as I sit and contemplate, I think about culture and what it might mean. In my case, I was gifted by my parents and schools with the love of poetry and art from a young age. I know well that everyone is not so lucky and that, in any case, culture has many meanings. "Culture," writes Raymond Williams, "is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language." From its original verbal meaning to cultivate the land to high, low, and middlebrow culture onto so many other meanings and conflicts that are often tied up with social class issues. There are cultures and culture.

When I say cultural memories, I mean my memories, no one else's.

I learned early on that the music of verse, the sound of birds in the trees, the rush of a creek murmuring over rocks, the lilt of words spoken passionately, the placement of a certain blue

paint on a canvas, a singer's voice flying with a tune of joy or sadness, and a instrument's vibrations were all connected to the reverence I felt as an altar boy tolling the bells and repeating Latin responses, whose full meaning I couldn't grasp amid the incense and candle smoke: *Et introibo ad altare Dei: ad Deum qui laetificat juventutem mea* - "And I go to the altar of God, to God who gives joy to my youth."

It was the sound of the bells that entranced me, and that I was allowed to ring them. To sound in, to participate in the ancient ritual that created a musical enclave from the beyond. I knew then, as I know now, that God has many altars, and that reverence before them and their mysteries is the right refrain. Bob Dylan singing "[Ring Those Bells](#)" comes to mind:

Ring them bells, ye heathen
From the city that dreams
Ring them bells from the sanctuaries
'Cross the valleys and streams
For they're deep and they're wide
And the world's on its side
And time is running backwards
And so is the bride

So while it is not necessary to draw on stored cultural memories to appreciate the birds in the trees on nature's altar on a beautiful spring morning, for me it enriched the experience. You may have heard echoes of Yeats, Van Morrison, and others in my words, but the reality of the world I described would be the same for those who never heard of these artists, who find their inspiration in the terrible beauty of nature and have other associations.

Are we really at home in our interpreted world, a poet once asked? It is a good question. This poet was Rilke, who wrote in the *Duino Elegies* :

For beauty is nothing/but the beginning of terror/which we are still just able to endure/and we are so awed because it serenely/disdains to annihilate us/Every angel is terrifying/And so I hold myself back and swallow the call note of my dark sobbing/Ah, whom can we ever turn to in our need?

Whom can we ever turn to in our need?

Everyone carries different associations that come to us when we are not thinking but are only immersed in our experiences. Snatches of trace memories, images, words, sounds, smells, the look of light, etc. that usually occur slightly after the first encounter with natural phenomena. One doesn't have to know Shakespeare or William Wordsworth to experience nature's beauty. Nor its terrors. Yet I must admit I am partial to words like these from Wordsworth:

Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind;
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be;
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering;

In the faith that looks through death,
In years that bring the philosophic mind.

But whatever our backgrounds, we are all interpreters of our world and words are our fundamental way of doing so. Words and metaphors that lead us to myth and art, even when its expression is wordless sound or pictures. Words that are often unacknowledged prayers to an unknown God.

For many years I taught what are called the liberal arts. This was an extension of my own education in the classics, philosophy, theology, and sociology, disciplines divided in name only but married in reality to science, literature, history, languages, etc. It is all one study when rightly understood. But our schools and universities have been abandoning this approach for the sterility of numbers and the cold dead hand of technology and digital dementia. For specialization, where professors know nothing outside their limited disciplines. For the study of the parts without any sense of the whole.

A new Dark Age is closing upon us, as Max Weber noted more than a century ago when he described the people who run our societies and educational institutions as “specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.”

Students are being denied the rich heritage of words, images, and music that form the basis of Western culture. Without such a repository of cultural wisdom, they are left to draw only on popular cultural sources to interpret the world and their lives. More and more of these sources are anemic, if not degrading. It is not that some are not extraordinarily rich and meaningful, as is evident from those I link to in this essay, but a quick look around should convince any fair-minded person that the pickings are quite slim. We are drowning in cultural garbage that is being pumped out through digital media, primarily so-called smart phones, into young people’s minds and souls. It is poison. And the schools have devolved into protection rackets where students are protected from their own thoughts and ideas that might allow them to think and be thought.

To think, question, and debate have been replaced with censorship and the coddling of young minds. Such censorship, of course, has its counterpart in society at large. Call it propaganda, which is exactly what it is.

If Rilke is right, we will never be at home on this earth, our interpreted world. As a poet and a man of words, he no doubt knew that there is no alternative to interpretation, to ask why, to use words to describe our experiences and to seek meaning as we travel through the mystery of time and existence.

I know, however, for those minutes I stood by the lake in rapt silence as the birds sang and the water lapped, I felt at home.

Home, of course, is a complicated word, for we are time-bound creatures always moving on, travelers who are home one minute and gone the next. Even the word culture derives from an Indo-European root meaning to revolve, tied as it is, as are we, to the idea of a natural cycle, the turning of the seasons. Doesn’t a contemporary artist, Joni Mitchell, tell this beautifully with [The Circle Game](#).

To say we are wayfarers is accurate, always on the way, as my recently departed dear

friend Graeme MacQueen, a Buddhist and 9/11 scholar told me, when he laughingly said to me right before he recently died, that the old folk and Christian gospel song, *Wayfaring Stranger*, was his story too. He was a man of many talents who established the Centre for Peace Studies at McMaster University in Canada, wrote the important book, *The 2001 Anthrax Deception*, and much more, even a children's book.

Graeme did all his work with the awareness that we are temporary sojourners on this earth, and that it is through stories and myths and their associations that come to us unbidden that we can connect life with death, the material and spiritual sides of our natures, in the search for peace. He died at home. I imagine him singing along with the words of the song: "I am a poor wayfaring stranger. . . . I'm goin' home to see my father/I'm goin' home, no more to roam/I am just goin' over Jordan/I am just goin' over home

And then laughing so hard he couldn't breathe, just as he did earlier when he told me his doctor's name was Dr. Sender, as he prepared to hit the road.

There is no escape from telling. Life is sublime.

From his album, *On the Road*, Van Morrison takes us out with "The Beauty of the Days Gone By"



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This article was originally published on the author's blog site, [Behind the Curtain](#).

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