“God’s Spies”

A sermon delivered by Rev. Bruce Southworth, Senior Minister
The Community Church of New York Unitarian Universalist
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Reading “Bubble of Blue Air” in RIDERS ON THE EARTH. Archibald MacLeish, 1978
(Originally drafted in response to the first Apollo mission around the moon, in which he contemplates the view of the whole earth as seen from space, and printed in the NY Times on December 25, 1968. He edited that version for this one published in his 1978 book of essays.) (adapted to be gender inclusive)

Our conception of ourselves and of each other has always depended on our image of the earth.

When the earth was the World – all the world there was – and the stars were lights in Dante’s Heaven, and the ground beneath our feet roofed Hell, we saw ourselves as creatures at the center of the universe, the sole particular concern of God.

And when, centuries later, the earth was no longer the world but a small, wet spinning planet in the solar system of a minor star off at the edge of an inconsiderable galaxy in the vastness of space – when Dante’s Heaven foundered and there was no Hell – no Hell, at least, beneath our feet – we began to see ourselves not as God-directed actors in the solemn paces of a noble play, but rather as the victims of an idiotic farce where all the rest were victims also and multitudes had perished without meaning.

Now, in this latest generation of humankind, the image may have altered once again. For the first time in all of time we have seen the earth with our own eyes – seen the whole earth in the vast void as even Dante never dreamed of seeing it – seen what whimpering victims could not guess a person might see.

The medieval notion of the earth put us at the center of everything. The scientific notion put us nowhere: beyond the range of sense or reason – lost in absurdity and death. This latest notion may have other consequences. Formed as it was in the eyes of heroic voyagers who were also humans, it may remake our lost conception of ourselves. No longer that preposterous player at the center of an unreal stage… we may discover what we really are.

To see the earth as we now see it, small and blue and beautiful in that eternal silence where it floats, is to see ourselves as riders on the earth together, brothers (and sisters) on that bright loveliness in the unending night – (sisters and) brothers who see now we are truly (sisters and) brothers.
"GOD’S SPIES"
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"... out of life and beer
Or beer and life you may discern
Great truths"

So once wrote Archibald MacLeish, the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and playwright... who speaks of beer, life and great truths in one breath.

Poets have a curious reputation. Don Marquis, a newspaperman and a poet himself, once wrote: "Publishing a volume of verse is like dropping a rose petal down the Grand Canyon and waiting for the echo."

Or, as one British historian pronounced: "Perhaps no person can be a poet, or even enjoy poetry, without a certain unsoundness of mind."

Yet, it is the poets who speak of "the inevitability of death and the possibility of love." (James Dickey) It is the poets who reveal and glorify existence; it is the poets who "are more like everybody than anybody else" and who "stun us because they (create) perfect statements of what we already know." (Mark Van Doren) It is the poets who create the metaphors of every age – The Odyssey, The Divine Comedy, The Waste Land, Riders on the Earth.

It is the poets who are truly God's spies on earth who ponder the mystery of things and who proclaim the meaning behind the mystery of life.

This morning I share some of the poetry and life of one of the most trustworthy and most reliable reporters about the mystery of life, Archibald MacLeish – three-time Pulitzer Prize winner for poetry and drama, whose essays also deserve praise for the vision they proclaim.

The master poet, Shakespeare, penned that haunting phrase about "God's Spies" in "King Lear". “Toward the play's end before the deluge of the dark”, Lear says to Cordelia that together we must go to our prison chamber, and there "take upon's the mystery of things, as though we were God's spies." (Riders on the Earth, 41)

The spy discovers the secrets so often hidden and reports back, and such discovery was Archibald MacLeish's life-work. He was a soldier, a scholar, an expatriate in Paris of the 1920s, an editor of Fortune magazine, an anti-fascist and anti-communist polemicist, Librarian of Congress, Assistant Secretary of State under FDR, twice a
Pulitzer Prize winner for poetry and once for drama, Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard University, essayist, and a gentle soul.

I recall vividly seeing on public television a number of years ago, Bill Moyers interviewing Archibald MacLeish at his farm in Western Massachusetts where I too had a chance to visit after Thanksgiving in 1981. Moyers was wise enough simply to allow this sage to speak his mind. And, as powerful as any words MacLeish uttered to the journalist was the obviously powerful love between Ada and Archibald MacLeish, then married more than half a century.

He depicts their dialogue in a poem titled "The Old Gray Couple (2):" first her voice, then his, and so back and forth:

She: Love, says the poet, has no reasons.
He: Not even after fifty years?
She: Particularly after fifty years.
He: What was it, then, that lured us, that still teases?
She: You used to say my plaited hair!
He: And then you’d laugh.
She: Because it wasn’t plaited.
Love had no reasons so you made one up to laugh at. Look! The old, gray couple!
He: No, to prove the adage true: Love has no reasons but old lovers do.
She: And they can’t tell.
He: I can and so can you.
Fifty years ago we drew each other, magnetized needle toward the longing north. It was your naked presence that so moved me. It was your absolute presence that was love….
He: Ours is the late, last wisdom of the afternoon. We know that love, like light, grows dearer toward the dark.

... "Love like light grows dearer toward the dark," and this old gray couple’s love emanated from camera, to film, to small screen undiminished.

Archibald MacLeish was born May 7, 1892, and when I invited myself to visit him and he agreed, he was 89, gracious, curious, thoughtful. He died just short of age 90, six months later in 1982.

Born in Glencoe Illinois, he attended Yale as an undergraduate. He edited the Yale literary magazine, played varsity football and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. Much of his life’s story can be found in his poems and his own essays. He took upon himself the "mystery of things" at an early age as shown in a poem he simply titles, "Eleven," no doubt his age when he remembers hating words and studies, favoring a garden shed.
He recalls the silent encounter with a darkness and earth smells. He writes that he would:

Push back the shed door and upon the sill  
Stand pressing out the sunlight from his eyes ...  
And sit there, quiet,...  
And at noon would come...  
   the old gardener, like  
A priest, like an interpreter, and bend  
Over his baskets.  
   And they would not speak:  
They would say nothing. And the child would sit there  
Happy as though he had no name, as though  
He had been no one: like a leaf, a stem,  
Like a root growing—

The child took upon himself the mystery of things, and he knew he was like a root, a stem, a leaf, growing.

Following Yale, MacLeish entered Harvard Law School for a year, entered the army as a private to fight in World War I, and emerged a captain, after which he completed law school. He taught law at Harvard a year, practiced law for three years and then told the prestigious law firm for which he worked that he was resigning to go to Paris to pursue his career as a poet. The same day, as chance happens, he was to have been invited to become a partner in the firm at age 31.

In Paris, he was a compatriot of Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, Picasso, Stravinsky, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Gertrude Stein. During his sojourn in the 1920s in Paris, he published a volume titled Streets In The Moon. In it was a poem titled "Memorial Rain" for Kenneth MacLeish, his brother who had died in the First World War.

As one of God's spies taking upon himself the mystery of things, he confronted the death of his brother:

All night in Brussels the wind had tugged at my door:  
I had heard the wind at my door and the trees strung  
Taut, and to me who had never been before  
In that country it was a strange wind, blowing  
Steadily, stiffening the walls, the floor,  
The roof of my room. I had not slept for knowing  
He too, dead, was a stranger in that land  
And felt beneath the earth in the wind's flowing  
A tightening of roots and would not understand,  
Remembering lake winds in Illinois,  
That strange wind. I had felt his bones in the sand  
Listening.

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Later in his life, in a poem written in his eighties, MacLeish is mindful of his own finitude. He is resolute and yet respectful of death in this poem "Dozing On The Lawn:"

I fall asleep these days too easily –
doze off of an afternoon
in the warm sun by the humming trees –
but I wake too soon:

wake too soon and wake afraid
of the blinding sun, of the blazing sky.
It was dark in the dream where I was laid:
It is dark in the earth where I will lie.

As one of God’s spies, MacLeish truly reports that death is dark; he is trustworthy, neither glib nor shallow about the tragedy within life. But, he also affirms, that behind the mystery of things, meaning continues for those who have loved and been loved. He wrote a poem titled "For The Anniversary Of My Mother’s Death" and spoke of how a human life’s spirit can be compared to the living sea. (I love his alluring alliteration and silken sounds.)

You think a life can end?
Mind knows…
… how far beyond
The shattering of the waves
How deep within the land,
The surge of sea survives.

There is no least sea sound
Along these inland coves
Where the last waters ground
Yet something, lapsing, leaves
Slow silver on the sand:
The wave still lifts. It lives.

Those surgings never end
Where salt water moves...

Ada and Archibald MacLeish returned from Paris in 1928. It was not long before he became an editor for Fortune Magazine and was in the world of business. His first article was titled "and Apple Pie." He wrote:

Each weighs a rough three pounds. A knife will cut it. Three divisions will reduce it to six appropriate triangles. Each triangle will emit a faint warm smell of cinnamon and nutmeg. Subdivided with a four-pronged
fork and tasted, the mouth remembers apples. Cheese consorts with it. Coffee leaves it sweet.

He wrote about the Old Dutch Cleanser girl, skyscrapers, construction, housing, charities and inflation. For Saturday Review and The Nation and other journals, he wrote about the nature and role of poetry and about leftist writers, as well as writing more volumes of poetry. In 1932, he won the Pulitzer Prize for his epic Conquistador about Cortes and Montezuma.

In the 1930s, he became an ardent advocate of American democracy and engaged in polemics with Marxists and Fascists. There were great poems such as "America Was Promises," “Brave New World" and others in which MacLeish laments the passing of American virtues of freedom and democracy.

MacLeish was also a public servant as Librarian of Congress, Assistant Secretary of State under Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and chair of the US delegation to the UN conference that created UNESCO. When named by FDR as Librarian of Congress, a Republican Congressman from New Jersey declared, "that the nomination of a poet was a repetition of evidence that Communist influence had entered executive appointments lately."

Always central to his mature poetry has been the theme of human freedom, which has best found expression politically in America.

In the 1970s, he would write a poem called "National Security:"

There are three names
in a locked file
in a secret room
on a classified stair
in the house of state.

They are not to be spoken.

The first is old,
black and gold,
cool as lacquer
smelling of plums.
This name is Cambodia.

The second is Laos,
a flexible necklace
knotted with silver
sounds like the language
of orioles.

The third is Vietnam,
a dried child
mailed to its mother
by B-52s
in a cellophane envelope.

Three names
in a locked file
in a secret room
on a classified stair
in the house of state:
not to be spoken.

Nevertheless
the names bleed.
The blood runs out
under the secret
doors and down
the classified stair
to the floor of state
and over the stoop
and out on the continent:
the country is steeped in it.

Not to be spoken.

From public service, MacLeish moved to Harvard University to be Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory from 1949 to 1962. He continued writing his poems, winning a second Pulitzer Prize for his collected poems and then a Pulitzer Prize for his classic contemporary portrayal of Job (a righteous man, as depicted in Hebrew scripture, who is afflicted by God to demonstrate to Satan that Job would remain faithful). In his drama "J.B.", MacLeish confronts the disillusionment of humanity with God and the injustice in the world, yet he affirms the possibility of love in the face of despair.

J.B., like Job, has suffered mightily – the world has been destroyed in nuclear holocaust. At the very end of the play, J.B. cries out, "It’s too dark to see." His wife Sara responds, "Then blow on the coal of the heart, my darling."

Sara: The candles in churches are out.
The lights have gone out in the sky.
Blow on the coal of the heart
And we’ll see by and by."...
J. B. Blow on the coal of the heart and we’ll know...
We’ll know.

MacLeish in writing about J.B. declares that in human love, God exists and triumphs if God exists at all. "Our labor always, like Job’s is to learn through suffering to love – to love even that which lets us suffer."

There is a beautiful book that captures two days of conversation between Archibald MacLeish and Columbia University professor and poet Mark Van Doren.

In speaking about God to his friend, MacLeish said: "You know, Mark,

I know for myself if I were put through the orange squeezer and squeezed to the point where the pips began to squeak, I think I too would have to say that I'm not really sure whether I believe in any easily definable conception of God or not. I certainly don't believe in an anthropomorphic God. I don't believe in a god who spends his time thinking about me, and (personally) would find it rather shameful (of me) to believe in a god simply because he spent his time thinking about me…

I do think if I were squeezed down to the point where the pips began to emit high, shrill sounds, I would have to say, that what I surely do believe in is the unspeakable, infinite immeasurable, spiritual capacity of that thing called a (hu)man; a capacity which expresses itself in so many ways, but expresses itself nowhere more perfectly than in the capacity for friendship, which really is a capacity for love." (The Dialogues of Archibald MacLeish and Mark Van Doren, p. 267)

There were times when MacLeish would show his anguished soul and write,

Thou wouldst not think
How ill all's here about my heart!

Yet MacLeish emerged and remained a champion for humanity, a faithful believer in the human capacity for freedom, for democracy, for friendship, for love.

As he wrote in a poem titled "Creator:"

"We help each other through the blind
tall night beneath the infinite spaces:"

"We help each other," says God's spy!

Throughout his life, MacLeish believed passionately that true knowledge was not of head alone, but required engagement of the heart.
His "Theory About Poetry" is also a theory about life, and he writes to poets, and to us:

Know the world by heart
Or never know it!
Let the pedant stand apart –
Nothing he can name will show it:
Also him of intellectual art.
None know it
Till they know the world by heart.

Take heart, then, poet!

A poet, a statesman, a playwright, an essayist, a public figure and family man. Sometimes, because he knows the tragedies of the world, there is a touch of melancholy, yet there is his persistent search for meaning and his incessant, insistent hope. Inspired by a midsummer daybreak, he writes to the sun:

Kindle our souls, great sun, and our desire--
Kindle our souls! We've loved the night too long now. Set the dark alight,
the light ablaze, the blaze
to raging through the reek of these dim days
until our souls,
half rotten into selves, burn clean as coals! ("At Midsummer Dawn")

Champion of humanity, champion of democracy, champion of books, of friendship, of Love, and of the moon, as one of God's spies who tells us of the mystery of things and what lurks therein, here in our world – the final word of such a bounteous soul might be one of praise:

God's will in the world if we could learn it,
test it on our lips, would taste of praise.

Why else should the world be beautiful? Why should the leaves look as they do, the light, the water?

I add one last poem: "With Age Wisdom."

At twenty, stooping round about,
I thought the world a miserable place,
Truth a trick, faith in doubt,
Little beauty, less grace.

Now at sixty what I see,
Although the world is worse by far,  
Stops my heart in ecstasy.  
God, the wonders that there are!

Sometimes in our world – "grave, noble, tragic" (87) – comes a poet with a gift, an ability to see, an ability to tell us what we already know down in our depths, a poet who proclaims a vision of life, a vision of what it means to be a human and fully alive. Sometimes we can learn to see and to hear, and we can become as God's spies in our own personal eloquence. We can proclaim too, each of us, our own vision of a being human and fully alive.

Archibald MacLeish is surely one of the most trustworthy and reliable of God's spies.

- "riders on the earth"
- "out of life and beer / Or beer and life you may discern great truths"
- “the late last wisdom of the afternoon... love, like light, grows dearer toward the dark."
- "like a leaf, a stem, like a root growing"
- "I had not slept for knowing / He too, dead, was a stranger in that land"
- “the surge of sea survives"
- "Our labor is to love… even that which lets us suffer"
- "the unspeakable, infinite immeasurable, spiritual capacity of that thing called a (hu)man"
- "Know the world by heart or never know it."
- "God, the wonders that there are!"