

Winter Sundays

BY ROBERT HAYDEN

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

This may seem like an odd starting place for the topic of renewal, this poem that seems so drenched in regret, but on a

deeper reading, this poem contains several kinds of renewal and supports what I want to talk about today.

First, if we look at the actions of the father, “in the blue black cold’. The first thing he does is to ‘make banked fires blaze’. We all know that banked fires are not dead, they are not cold, but they are waiting for the right fuel and the right amount of oxygen to rejuvenate, to be renewed.

Banked fires are not fires that have to completely relit, they are not created “new” but they are renewed.

And then we have the polished shoes, renewed after being scuffed and worn, these shoes are brought back to their original shiny condition, they are renewed..

And finally, in those last heartbreaking lines ‘What did I know, what did I know of love’s austere and lonely offices?’ What’s really happening under all the regret and sadness is a kind of renewal... the renewal that comes from understanding. We find it in that past tense verb, did..

The poet does not say, what do I currently know... rather he says what did I know. because I know something different now.

And because of this, there’s a renewal in his feeling about his father, an understanding. but there’s some cost to this realization. we can assume from the poem that the father is dead, because of the poet’s age when he wrote the piece .. and the cost in this case is that fact that the “chronic angers

of that house' prevented the son from a earlier renewal of his relationship.

So, what I want to say today is that renewal is lovely. and some of what we think about as renewal seems effortless, but it is not. We are not generally conscious of the way our cells reproduce and change, the way our skin cells slough off and new ones form, but there is always a caloric cost, we need to be refueling, even when we think we have done nothing.

Even when we think about about something like "rest and rejuvenation' that lead to renewal, renewal of energy, of feeling, of love, it is not easy. There's that apparent paradox of the renewal that comes from letting go in meditation, or the sense of renewal that sitting by a clear flowing stream will be, but while it may seem paradoxical it's not really. Even the act of meditation requires a kind of work, requires a kind of learning, one doesn't become good at meditation on the first try, it's not like eating ice cream, which requires no work at all.

So, that stream we are sitting by, is full of energy, it's full of movement, It's not passive. all we have to do is examine water eroded rocks to know there is nothing passive about water. So, we might be gaining calm and renewal from that stream, but neither the observer nor that stream is passive.

Think about spring, the way that seeds germinate and push through the soil, create leaves and stems and flowers and

then fruit. Again, this is not without cost, and a hard winter or a drought can disrupt the process, too much darkness can prevent sunlight from reaching the plants and prevent photosynthesis, the changing of sunlight into energy. All of this, the spectacular apple blossoms or the extravaganza of lilacs, all take work, but work that we humans usually don't consider, there is always a cost.

Renewal is not a Hallmark card concept, it's not just an easy 'I'm sorry.'

I have lived for the past three years, and will for one more in the shadow of Dietrick Bonhoeffer, the Christian theologian who became famous for his resistance to and ultimate execution by Hitler's Nazi regime, He was hanged at age 39 in 1945.

Union theological Seminary, where I am studying has a conflicted relationship to Bonhoeffer who studied and taught there in the mid-1930s. Basically he considered most Union students not serious enough, too frivolous, but he was coming from Hitler's Germany and they were coming from all over the more peaceful US, but most of the current students see Bonhoeffer for the serious and important thinker that he was.

But one of the central ideas in much of Bonhoeffer's writing is the idea of costly grace, and one need not be Christian, or

actually even technically religious to understand this..
Bonhoeffer says

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession.

While this is theological language, the meaning is clear, it seems to me. The Hallmark sentimentality will never get us to renewal, the glib answer, won't do it, only the work will get us there.

New York City is a city of scaffolding. A recent estimate was that something like 50% of the city has scaffolding around buildings. The Lutheran church where I did my Field Work my second year of seminary was built in 1903, and when I go there it had scaffolding covering the front of the building all the way up to the steeple. That scaffolding came down last year, after 20 years, 20 years of work had gone into renewing the facade of the building and its steeple. Apparently 20 years ago, it had been in such bad shape that bits of masonry fell on to pedestrians, now the building stands out, across the street from the Fredrick Douglass playground and one of the police precincts. It is

renewed, it is no longer just one of the thousands of buildings wrapped in scaffolding. And once again Trinity Lutheran of Manhattan's steeple rises, with its blue green bronze patina into the air.

But it took work, it took massive amounts of fund raising, and budgeting, it took dealing with city bureaucracies and red tape.

The same is true for people. After I left my husband in 2015, I was adrift, I knew I had done the right thing, but I was adrift and broken, and a dear friend of my mine at one point told me that in his experience, it takes 3 years to recover from that kind of disruption. I felt like I needed a scaffolding around myself, to keep the pieces from falling on pedestrians. But, the scaffolding eventually came down, and I was renewed. It took work. It was hard, but like Trinity's steeple, I can rise renewed into the sky.

The couple who decides to renew marriage vows usually does so after a significant amount of time, it's not on the first or even the fifth anniversary, but more like on the 20th or 25th or 40th or 50th anniversary,

which tells us that they have been done some work and the relationship is valuable. And has survived... they can look back on the relationship and say. "What we had once, we have again and continue have'

But no one would say that is without work.

So, I love the idea that renewal can come to us unbidden, even unasked for, but I don't quite buy it, just as I don't believe the bean seed germinating and ultimately flowering is costless, There's always a cost. it cost a lot for Robert Hayden to arrive at the point where he could see the grace in his father's life, see the daily renewal that man brought into Hayden's own life, but eventually he gets there, and learns something of love in the process.