



An Ode to Spring

by Robyn Fitzgerald

On the first day of spring in 1985, my great Aunty Bett invited me to join her in celebrating an "ode to spring". We wandered down to the foreshores of Sydney Harbour where she lived, laid out a picnic rug, popped a bottle of champagne and shared odes of love, life, heartbreak, hope and joy until the evening fell. I was still at university, self-conscious yet full of hope. Aunty Bett was a grand old lady who as a young woman had fallen in love with her future husband, Japanese pianist Shinshiro Katayama, and moved to Tokyo in 1937. There she enjoyed the love and culture of her beloved Shin's family, including his family's friendship with the Buddhist monk D.S. Suzuki, until in 1941 when, with the bombing of Pearl Harbour, she was interned. Three weeks before the devastation of the atomic bomb being dropped on Hiroshima, and now on the edge of starvation, Bett and Shin's first and only child Davy was born. With her little boy's health ailing, Bett sought to return to Australia, where she was officially labelled a traitor, and refused entry.



Elizabeth and Davy arrive in Australia, 1947 (See newspaper article here [National Library of Australia](#))

It was not until 1947, after extraordinary efforts by family and friends, that Bett and Davy eventually were allowed home. With time, as her heart healed, and despite attracting unwanted racist attention, she began a career as an author. One of her earliest books, *Be Ready with Bells and Drums*, became the movie *A Patch of Blue*, with actors Sidney Portier and Shelley Winters portrayal of the relationship between an African American man and blind Anglo American woman at the height of civil rights movement receiving much attention. Aunty Bett became known for her conviction that 'love is blind'. Reflecting back upon the war, she said "those four dreadful years taught me how to appreciate peace and to hope that one wonderful

day the world will really be peaceful". This ode to spring, written for Bett in celebration of her desire for a peaceful world, has been born of contemplating Spring as icon.



The Mysterious Garden (1911) by Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh, Wiki Commons

It is still winter outside as I write, yet roses, begonias, azaleas, callistemons and lilies, the sonorous bird song of the butcher bird, and the garden shimmering with sunlight, radiate like the faces of the holy ones against a gold-leaf background of a delicately painted icon, drawing me into my desire to embody the deep peace of the eternal nature of Spring. These words from the unknown author of the Song of Songs rise in my heart:

*Look, winter is over
the rains are done,
wildflowers spring up in the fields.
Now is the time of the nightingale.
In every meadow you hear
the song of the turtledove.*

*The fig tree has sweetened
Its new green fruit
And the young budded vines smell spicy.
Hurry, my love, my friend
come away.*

Song of Songs 2:11-13¹

Though I know these words well, it is the response of the created world to the awakening of the bride that is shimmering for me at this time in my life. As the lovers are filled and possessed by each other, nature erupts in delight. Wildflowers spring up, green figs sweeten, vines release fragrant spicy aromas, and the song of the shy turtledove is heard everywhere. It seems Spring is the most fitting means for the author to declare the all-whole, harmonious, communal and ravishing love of God. Winter is over. The restlessness, disturbances and

hinderances that have assailed the Bride have settled. The pain and suffering of her exile has been tended quietly, safely and with great love.



Margaret MacDonald Mackintosh's exquisite painting *Gesso Panel in House for an Art Lover* captures something of the essence of this song. As the bride embraces her Beloved, boundaries between the two dissolve, as does the ground they stand on, and they sink deep into the *anima mundi* of the earth. Roses flower all around them and, beautifully, from within their embrace, as the bride is transformed in communion with all creation. We could say the bride has become spring. John of the Cross writes tenderly of this new countenance of the bride, telling us, "she feels a new spring...and gladness"ⁱⁱ. For Sri Aurobindo, "her individualism is universal"ⁱⁱⁱ. Over 700 years ago, Gertrude of Helfta sang of the bride's new identity that we see in the vividness of Margaret's painting: "I am the most fulgent spring day, the only one that grows ever bright and knows no waning"^{iv}. This is a vision of intimate, ravishing eternal love, awakened in the bride – a love which she is invited to never leave.

When we behold spring as icon and become immersed in its fertility of blossoming life, we embody a quality of awareness that is infused with the newness of creation echoed in the Book of Revelation: "Behold, I am making all things new" (21:5). It is derived from the Old English *nīwe*, "made or established for the first time, fresh, recently made or grown; unheard-of, different from the old; untried, inexperienced, unused". Spring is the archetype of newness, with the word *new* hinting at the virginal state of awareness of our beholding, from which all the beauty of stillness and eruption of life that we know Spring contains. Such still flowing

awareness arising in each new moment is described beautifully by Evelyn Underhill, as a “static beatitude, still Fruition and perfect Rest” and “the coming of the Bridegroom, the welling up of the Spirit, the stormy, eager, unsatisfied love of the Spirit”, coexisting in perfect union.^v Spring invites us into her living example of the deep truth abiding and flowing through every person, creature and particle in every moment, where a shared and felt unity and living harmony opens up, as every part of creation participates in this outpouring of newness. Even those parts of life that feel dissonant and conflicted are part of this humble, unified harmonising. Iain McGilchrist’s idea of an “unpreconceived freshness”^{vi}, speaks something of the gift spring offers, always disclosing something new of God.

Spring cannot help but draw us into the deepest respect for all life, as we discover that no one and no thing can exist alone, nor can it be left out of creation’s ever new fecundity. We are one, enmeshed in the very activity of being One. And yet this activity is not simply a connection and connecting to all things. It is an activity of intensifying and expanding love, as Kerrie Hide encourages: “oneing is not something separate or that happens to us. We are one, oned and in an endless oneing in a holistic flowing movement that ones our substance and sensuality, fusing, intensifying, expanding, grounding, increasing our wholeness in Christ in the Trinity in the oneness of boundless love”^{vii} Oneing is the contemplation that creates the connection to, and connects the eternal and the infinite, spirit and matter, dark and light, crucifixion, death and rebirth, poised at the edge of the evolutionary moment. Perhaps it is for this reason, that Hadewijch, who calls springtime “Love itself”, sings, “That springtime of eternity, I continually long for”^{viii}.



In all this fecundity and pouring out of life, Spring’s celebration of newness necessarily includes all that is dying and passing away. George Wilson helps us grasp this mystery, when he writes:

...the ever-new creation, where anything that arises is annihilated instantly, so that One is not the same instant after instant. This means that nothing is of itself alone, so that One has no separate parts. Within One everything is connected.^{ix}

The “ever-new creation” issues a radical invitation to being the annihilation that takes place in each moment of birth, an annihilation that George reminds us does not precede newness, but is part of it. *Eka ava advitiya!* exclaims Swāmī Abhishiktānanda “there is but one without a second”.^x “And yet” adds Beatrice Bruteau, “all this”.^{xi} My sense is spring invites a tender gentleness in regard to notions such as ‘surrender’ and ‘letting go’, an embrace of a *kenosis of newness* that is implicit, integral and whole, where no tear, no thing and no one that is surrendered is not implicit and essential to the newness we welcome. As Teilhard de Chardin proclaims:

Over every living thing which is to spring up, to grow, to flower, to ripen during this day say again the words: 'This is my Body'. And over every death-force which waits in readiness to corrode, to wither, to cut down, speak again your commanding words which express the supreme mystery of faith: 'This is my Blood'.^{xii}

Wonderfully, when we drop into the dynamism and ever-newness of springtime, we discover that the annihilation we might call dying is shared in every moment, with every other person and creature and with every particle of matter. Furthermore, as Thomas Merton suggests, we are active as one in this ever-new moment of creation: “creation in its innocence asks permission to “be” once again, as it did on the first morning that ever was”.^{xiii} In itself this question is a beautiful meditation. For as spring dances into each new day, our request to “be” becomes inseparable from the uninterrupted Divine response “May you be”.^{xiv} that Beatrice Bruteau affirms. Thich Nhat Hanh’s poem, “Please Call me by my True Name” captures the essence of this harmonising, as he hears every part and person of creation speak: “Don’t say that I will depart tomorrow - even today I am still arriving”.^{xv}

The words that follow in Brother Thay’s poem are worthy of including here, for they testify to the ways in which the newness of springtime holds the anguish of our personal and human shadow, helping us to embrace our deepest identity and truth:

*Don't say that I will depart tomorrow—
even today I am still arriving.*

*Look deeply: every second I am arriving
to be a bud on a Spring branch,
to be a tiny bird, with still-fragile wings,
learning to sing in my new nest,
to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.*

*I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,
to fear and to hope.
The rhythm of my heart is the birth and death
of all that is alive.*

*I am a mayfly metamorphosing
on the surface of the river.
And I am the bird
that swoops down to swallow the mayfly.*

*I am a frog swimming happily
in the clear water of a pond.
And I am the grass-snake
that silently feeds itself on the frog.*

*I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks.
And I am the arms merchant,
selling deadly weapons to Uganda.*

*I am the twelve-year-old girl,
refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean
after being raped by a sea pirate.*

*And I am also the pirate,
my heart not yet capable
of seeing and loving.*

*I am a member of the politburo,
with plenty of power in my hands.
And I am the man who has to pay
his "debt of blood" to my people
dying slowly in a forced-labor camp.*

*My joy is like Spring, so warm
it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth.
My pain is like a river of tears,
so vast it fills the four oceans.*

*Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and laughter at once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.*

*Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up
and the door of my heart
could be left open,
the door of compassion.*



*Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh
O Ye All Ye That Walk in Willowwood*

For Richard Rolle, contemplation was an ode, a musical state that when rightly understood embraced every aspect of the soul's communion with Reality.^{xvi} We have heard many beautiful mystics singing their ode to the deep reality of spring in this reflection, inviting us to embody the divine awareness of newness in each moment. And we have heard something of Spring singing her ode to us. As we celebrate the first day of spring, with its extravagant expression of newness, may we feel the joy of all creation responding to the creative union that is the Contemplative Evolution Network. May we each sing our own, precious ode, creating the peace that my beautiful and brave Auntie Bett, along with so many of us in the world today, long for. Winter is over! Now is the time of the nightingale.



Nightingale, Wiki Commons

ⁱ Ariel and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs, A New Translation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995)

ⁱⁱ *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, trans K. Kavanaugh and O Rodriguez (Washington: ICS Publications, 1979), 560.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sri Aurobindo, in Beatrice Bruteau, *Worthy is the World: The Hindu Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 1971), 49.

^{iv} *Gertrude of Helfta: Spiritual Exercises* trans, G Lewis and J Lewis (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1989), 41, Ex 111: 9.

^v Evelyn Underhill, *Ruysbroek*, (New York; Cosimo Classics, 2007), 172.

^{vi} Iain McGilchrist, *Ways of Attending* (London: Routledge, 2019), 17.

^{vii} Kerrie Hide, *Discerning from the Oneness of Love: Discernment in Julian of Norwich and the Cloud of Unknowing Seer*, 1, at <https://contemplatio.com.au/writings/>

^{viii} *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), Poem 31, 34; 31.

^{ix} George Wilson, *That Art Thou*, Talk given to WCCM, 25th May 2022.

^x Swāmī Abhishiktānanda, *In the Bosom of the Father: The Collected Poems of a Benedictine Mystic* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2018), 191.

^{xi} Beatrice Bruteau, *Worthy is the World: The Hindu Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 1931), 47

^{xii} Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe*, trans, N. Wildiers (London: Collins, 1961), 23.

^{xiii} Thomas Merton, *Confessions of a Guilty Bystander*, in Katherine Deignan, *Thomas Merton, A Book of Hours* (Indiana; Sorin Books, 2007) 46.

^{xiv} Beatrice Bruteau, *The Grand Option: Personal Transformation and a New Creation* (Indiana: Notre Dame Press, 2001), 166.

^{xv} Thich Nhat Hanh, *Call Me by My True Names* in *The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1999)

^{xvi} Richard Rolle of Hampole, *Fire of Love*, Evelyn Underhill trans, (Christian Classics Ethereal Library <https://ccel.org/ccel/rolle/fire/fire>).