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The Life & Legacy of Emily Dickinson:
National Poetry Month
The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg
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April is National Poetry Month, and poetry is having a moment. The hardcover edition of the poem Amanda Gorman read at President Biden's inauguration has the "highest week-one sales of any poetry book ever published." That's impressive, but in the spirit of full disclosure, if you buy the book make sure you know that it's only 32 pages, and primarily includes just that inaugural poem—along with a forward by Oprah and a prologue by the poet. If you want to read more of Gorman's work, you might want instead to pre-order Gorman's first full collection which will be published in September.

I should also mention that if this poetry service leaves you wanting more poetry in your life, our Intern Minister Jen leads a lunch check-in every Wednesday at 12:30pm—a time of sharing, exploring a poem together, & open conversation. Anyone is welcome to join.

For now, as part of National Poetry Month, we are holding our annual Poetry Service in which we explore the life and legacy of a particular poet. Although individual poems can be moving and meaningful without knowing anything about the author, learning about a poet's background can make their work even more deeply resonant.

In recent years, we've explored the life and work of Elizabeth Bishop, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Mary Oliver. And in the future, I look forward to sharing with you about other major poets including Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath, Czesław Miłosz, Denise Levertov, Audre Lorde, and many more. For today, our focus is Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886).

Although theBelle of Amherst was not a UU, she was often UU adjacent, and her life and legacy feel freshly relevant in a pandemic. After all, who knows more than Emily Dickinson about making the most of what staying home can offer? And her poetry includes powerful themes of confronting death and wrestling with grief—as well of celebrating the beauty of nature. (And as science is telling us: outside is safer in a pandemic—so we are well advised to spend time savoring the outdoors in such a time as this.)

Regarding Emily Dickinson's life, part of conventional wisdom presumes there isn't much to say. She is often thought to have lived a sequestered and uneventful life, but it turns out there's a whole lot more to say the closer you look. I was surprised to learn, for example, that two of the most respected biographies of Emily Dickinson are both massive tomes. In 1972, Richard Sewall won the National Book Award for *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, published by Harvard University Press. That book weighs in at an astounding 924 pages. It's so large that it is divided into two volumes. Alfred Habegger's 2002 biography of Dickinson titled *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books* is a little shorter, but not by much at 800 pages.

If close to two thousand pages about Emily Dickinson's life feels like a little much, the new *Dickinson* TV series on Apple TV+ is a fun, accessible introduction. As a sample, watch the **trailer to the first season,** which is only about a minute long. As you watch, notice the references to women's access to education, the same sex attraction between Emily and her best friend Sue Gilbert (who later married Emily's brother Austin), and Emily's willingness to transgress the conventions of her time in service to her art.

To start at the beginning, Emily Dickinson was born in 1830 in Amherst, Massachusetts. She was the middle child of two siblings (Ackmann xiv-xv). And unlike many women in the nineteenth century who did not have access to higher education (30), Emily not only attended Amherst Academy from ages nine through sixteen, but also Mount Holyoke Seminary for a few years after that (Wineapple 51, 54).

And although she dropped out of Mount Holyoke before graduating, and spent the rest of her life in her parents' house, her life was far from boring. In the words of

Martha Ackmann from *These Fevered Days: Ten Pivotal Moments in the Making of Emily Dickinson* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2020):

> On the surface, Emily Dickinson lived an ordinary life: she resided in one town, went to school, never held a job, lived in her parents' home, remained single, and died at age fifty-five. To many who knew her, Dickinson's only acclaim was winning second prize for her rye and Indian bread at the annual cattle show…. Dickinson's internal world, however, was extraordinary. She loved passionately, wrote scores of letters, anguished over abandonment, fought with God, found ecstasy in nature, embraced seclusion, was ambivalent toward publication, and created 1,789 poems that she tucked into a dresser drawer. Only after her death, when her sister opened the drawer, did the world begin to realize that the life of Emily Dickinson was far from commonplace. (xiii)

I should also emphasize that while Emily Dickinson was a strong introvert who treasured spending a lot of time alone, she also enjoyed long conversations; loved music, baking, and reading; and she played the piano well (2, 15; Wineapple 55).

And, of course, the reason that she is the only Dickinson we are still talking about two hundred years later is her remarkable poetry. We can also be honest, however, that her poems can also be quite dense and challenging to read. But they often repay close, attentive re-readings.

Dickinson's poems can be difficult because they often push the limits of ordinary language. As she said in one of her poems:

> Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
> Success in Circuit lies
> Too bright for our infirm Delight
> The Truth's superb surprise
> As Lightning to the Children eased
> With explanation kind
> The Truth must dazzle gradually
> Or every man be blind — (Miller 563-564)

Similarly, here's the beginning of another poem that speaks to her experience of being a poet:

> This was a Poet - It is That
> Distills amazing sense
> From ordinary Meanings - (224)

From just those thirteen words you can get a sense of her highly original, circuitous, labyrinthine dance with language and meaning that make her one of the greatest poets in the English language.

In the words of one literary critic, "Dickinson burrowed deep into the individual soul, tapping feelings often suppressed, unacknowledged, recondite, and fearsome…. Her imagination was voracious, her images disquieting, her vision idiosyncratic, her language alive and gleaming" (Wineapple 112, 191).

Along these lines, I would be remiss if I failed to mention Dickinson's own criteria for judging if a poem was good—whether her own or someone else's. She wrote:

> If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way" (Ackmann 175).

Emily likely realized that she was writing poetry at that sort of visceral, mind-blowing level, but she was nevertheless conflicted about publishing her work. One of the issues is that she did not want to have her life overtaken with promoting her work, what we call today "building your platform" (206).

To preserve the time and space she needed to write such original poetry, she was ok with strong boundaries and remaining a relative nobody. Here's how she said it playfully in a poem:

> I'm Nobody! Who are you?
> Are you – Nobody – too?
> Then there's a pair of us!
> Don't tell! they'd banish us – you know!
> How dreary – to be – Somebody!
> How public – like a Frog –

To tell one's name – the livelong June –
To an admiring Bog! (Miller 128)

To further dive into this dynamic, let's watch the Season Two trailer from the *Dickinson* TV show. This one is about two minutes, and explores Emily finding her voice, wrestling with what other people think of her writing, and discerning whether to publish.

Dickinson has been renewed for a third season which will likely explore the poems she wrote during the Civil War. Many of these poems are about mortality, death, and grief, and feel deeply resonant today as we live through the end stages of a pandemic that has resulted in almost 3 million deaths worldwide. When someone we love dies, we are changed. Dickinson put it this way after she learned that a close family friend had died in the war: "The World is not the *shape* it was" (Ackmann 118-120).

A year into the war, I'll read you just the first and last stanza of a poem she wrote about her ongoing grief upon reading one tragic headline after another:

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain, *[have you ever felt like that? What a powerful, emotional, head spinning way to put it.]*
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading - treading - till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through -… *[just when we think clear thinking is emerging from the fog of sadness, she continues]*

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down -
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing - then - (Miller 179) *[it ends there, leaving the process unresolved, as so often happens with grief.]*

That same summer of 1862, she also wrote one of her most famous reflections on our inevitable mortality, which begins with the unforgettable line:

Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –

Whew! Emily Dickinson could write an attention grabbing first line! With only two lines, she arrestingly confronts us with the truth that busyness and a sense of self-importance are no protection against mortality.

And as we begin to glimpse the light at the end of this pandemic, and seek to continue processing our often overwhelming feelings, I find this poem by Dickson on grief from the summer of 1863—in the middle of the Civil War—to be so searingly honest in it's self-disclosure. I'll only share the first stanza of this longer poem:

> I measure every Grief I meet
> With narrow, probing, eyes –
> I wonder if It weighs like Mine –
> Or has an Easier size. (280)

If you are curious to read more of Dickinson's poetry, much of it is free online, and there are many different editions. My current favorite is *Emily Dickinson's Poems: As She Preserved Them*.

But before I move to the end of Dickinson's life, let me say just a little more about her significant connections of some of our Unitarian forebears. If you were watching those two TV trailers closely, you may have spotted Zosia Mamet (best know for playing Shoshanna on *Girls*) playing our Unitarian forebear Louisa May Alcott meeting Emily Dickinson. Or you may have seen comedian John Mulaney reenacting Henry David Thoreau's encounter with Emily. Among other such encounters, I could list our Transcendentalist forebear Ralph Waldo Emerson, who dined and spent the night next door to Emily at the home of her brother Austin and sister-in-law (and best friend) Sue (Ackmann 102-103).

But much more significant than any of those fairly brief meetings was the deep friendship of more than two decades between Dickinson and the Unitarian minister Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Over that time she sent him more than a hundred of her best poems (Wineapple 4). If you want the details, I recommend the excellent and accessible book *White Heat: The Friendship of Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson* by Brenda Wineapple.

There's a lot to say about Higginson, and I'll plan to preach a full sermon on him at some point. For now, I'll give you just a few highlights. As we've explored in depth in

the past, of the "Secret Six," who helped fund and supply John Brown's 1859 raid on the federal armory Harpers' Ferry, five were Unitarians, and two were Unitarian ministers. Rev. Higginson was one of those two. During the Civil War, he was also the colonel who volunteered to lead the first Black regiment of Union soldiers (Ackmann 140).

But in addition to being a fierce activist for racial justice, Higginson was a great lover of literature, poetry, and nature. And after Emily's death in 1886, it was Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd (with whom Emily's brother Austin had a longtime affair) who were the primary forces behind publishing Emily's poetry (235).

On the one hand, Todd in particular did not fully appreciate that Dickinson's idiosyncratic use of language and punctuation were intrinsic to her genius, and Todd made some extremely ill-informed editorial changes to Emilly's poetry in the early editions (Wineapple 274). But it is also true that Todd's often clumsy efforts—along with Higginson's unflagging persistence in championing Dickinson's work over many years after her death—did succeed in raising public awareness of Emily's work so that it could be published eventually in its original, unadulterated form.

For now, although there is so much more to say about the life and legacy of Emily Dickinson, I want to begin to transition toward another part of our annual UU ritual of Flower Communion with a final major theme of Dickinson's poetry, her love of nature. As she wrote in a lovely short poem in 1858 that shows her transgressive approach to religion and spirituality:

> In the name of the Bee —
> And of the Butterfly—
> And of the Breeze—Amen! (Miller 33)

In that spirit of exploring the sacred power of nature, you had the opportunity earlier during the Chalice Lighting to share a flower with one another, and as a related part of practicing of Flower Communion in these physically distanced times, I want to invite you in a few moments to watch a series of flower photos set to the hymn *De Colores* that we often sing during Flower Communion.

The practice of Flower Communion originated in 1921 in a Unitarian congregation in Prague, which at that time was the capital city of Czechoslovakia (now

called the Czech Republic). Rev. Norbert Čapek designed Flower Communion as a celebration of diversity and individual liberty in the face of the rising authoritarian of Nazism. And Flower Communion remains a powerful practice of celebrating individuality and multiculturalism in our own time:

> as no two flowers are alike, so too no two people are alike, yet each has a contribution to make. Together the different flowers form a beautiful bouquet. Our common bouquet would not be the same without the unique addition of each individual flower, and thus it is with the Beloved Community of UUCF: we are lessened if any one of us is absent.

In that spirit, as we prepare to watch this flower slideshow set to the music of *De Colores*, I invite you to savor the beauty of these images. As Emily Dickinson once confessed in a letter, “The only commandment I ever obeyed — ‘Consider the Lilies.’” This version of *De Colores* is fairly long, but I invite you to allow yourself to sink into the present moment as you watch. Open your heart, mind, and spirit as Emily might do. As she wrote in another nature poem from later in her life:

> To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee.
> One clover, and a bee,
> And revery
> The revery will do
> If bees are few. (Miller 688)

Revery means an "absentminded dreaming, imaginative thoughts indulged in while awake.” So let us enter into this meditation with revery and with great love for one another in all our diversity—and with great love for the diverse splendor of this beautiful planet.