Intersections

Volume 2007 | Number 25 Article 5

2007

Currents

Jaime Schillinger

JAIME SCHILLINGER

Currents

HERE WE ARE this beautiful morning in March, at a nexus of three currents of life pulling us into their rhythms. First, it is spring in Minnesota, and we can feel the earth starting to stir, starting to grow and green. Second, as faculty, staff and students we're back from spring break heading into the final seven weeks of school. There is a lot of work to be done, and we may be uncertain about what the future holds, nevertheless, we know that the future will come, the end of the school year will be upon us before we know it, and we'll be on our way even if we don't know where we'll be going. Third, for those of us who find strength and meaning in the church, we're fresh from the joy and the drama of Holy Week and its passion—the crucifixion, the empty grave, and the resurrection. In this third rhythm, as with the rhythms of spring and the school year, we find ourselves asking "What is happening now? Where is this current pulling us?"

In the midst of these three currents, one might be forgiven for feeling somewhat overwhelmed! Spring, at least for me, is quite enough. It is difficult for me to concentrate. My senses are awakening after the longest slumber. I can smell the earth that has been dormant for too long coming back to life and hear the birds that have been absent. The cycle of birth and life is beginning again, and it makes me giddy.

Perhaps we might content ourselves with celebrating this rebirth of spring. Perhaps we ought to refuse attempts to synthesize its meaning with our own personal journeys, or the mythos of a religious narrative. Maybe spring should be protected against a religious desire to baptize and control it's unruly energy. ee cummings, for example, seems to urge this resistance when he writes to the earth:

> *"how often have religions taken thee upon their scraggy knees*
> *squeezing and buffeting thee that thou mightest conceive gods*
> *(but true to the incomparable couch of death thy rhythmic lover*
> *thou answerest them only with spring)"* (O sweet spontaneous)

Alternatively, if the brute naturalism of cummings is unpersuasive, we might try to connect spring with the rhythms of the Christian life, reading into its significance the innocence of the garden, as does Gerald Manley Hopkins when he wonders,

> *what is all this juice and all this joy?*
> *A strain of the earth's sweet beginning*
> *In Eden garden –*
> *Have, get, before it cloy*
> *Before it cloud, Christ, land, and sour with sinning*
> *Innocent mind and Mayday in girl and boy. (Spring)*

But suppose you hesitate at this tug of spring; you might not find it so innocent. With Edna St. Vincent Millay, you might acknowledge that

> *The smell of the earth is good*
> *It is apparent that there is no death*

And yet, as she does, you might require better answers, noting

> *But what does that signify?*
> *Not only underground are the brains of men*
> *Eaten by maggots...*
> *It is not enough that yearly, down this hill,*
> *April comes like an idiot,*
> *babbling and strewing flowers.*

JAIME SCHILLINGER *is Assistant Professor of Religion at St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota. This talk was presented on March 29, 2005.*

I leave it to you to decide which current you feel most strongly today, whether you feel swept up by the pulse and eternal rhythm of nature, or can also feel the pull of career, academy, and religious narrative. Regardless, we find ourselves here together this morning in the midst of spring and the Easter season, being called into a future that is redolent with promises of unruly growth, graduation and vocation, a future that is coming but a future that we cannot predict or control.

And the passage from Scripture read this morning, I'd like to suggest, speaks beautifully to our situation. A fragment of a poem taken from the Song of Songs, it offers another poetic voice to add to those I've mentioned. (Actually it offers two voices, two rather bold young lovers, a bride and a bridegroom in the P.C. version.

The young woman imagines her beloved, and in her anticipation compares him to spring itself bursting forth in the land, a gazelle bounding over the hills, the very picture of exquisite desire.

And in that bucolic setting, she tells us, she hears her beloved calling to her. He uses the occasion of the tempestuous promise of spring, to call:

Rise up, my darling; my fair one, come away.
For see, the winter is past! ....
Rise up, my darling; my fair one, come away.

To where is she being called? Why can't he come to her where she is? And, if, following our Jewish and Christian forbearers, we read ourselves into this fragment somehow, we must also ask: To where are we being called in the spring? And who is calling us? And if we respond, will we be found?

With the right kind of imagination, I think, we *ought* to read ourselves and this spring morning into this biblical passage. Whether you manage to feel all three of the currents carrying us forward this morning or only one or two, I would like to suggest that at this very moment you are being stirred up to the rush and rhythm of something like love, provoked by a promise, called out of yourself by someone else.

Even if we were to focus only on the academic current, the language of love should hardly seem strange. The erotic attraction of truth and beauty and goodness has been an essential element of true liberal-arts learning since Plato penned dialogues like the Symposium and the Phaedrus. You may not realize it, but when you sit down to contemplate that end of the semester seminar paper, I'm suggesting, you're being called by a kind of love. And how implausible is it really, to extend this excitement to the sense of spiritual journey that your life ought to have—how surprised should you be to discover that your late night jaunt to the L & M, or your chance encounter with a homeless woman on a street corner in the city was a moment for you to experience the agitation of new life presenting itself to you as awakening desire. Why can't this call be understood in terms of the promise and frustrations of love?

Finally, suppose that you understand your spring, your academic search for knowledge, and your spiritual search for vocation in the context of Easter, suppose that you are flush with the surprise and joy of an empty grave. Consider the astonishing mix of terror and joy the two disciples felt as a result of their encounter on the road to Emmaus. Is it really so implausible to understand the provocations lying in wait for you this season in the same way? As hoped for but unpredictable meetings with the new surprising life to be found in your risen Lord?

In conclusion, let me return to the Song of Songs and observe an important point essential to understanding the kind of love that the text urges. While I've invited us all to read the text with imagination, we cheat ourselves if we spiritualize and allegorize too much or too quickly. Particularly as Christians, we may read the Songs as an allegory of Christ and the church; even so, I don't think we should ignore the fact that the language of love here is the language of love in the spring, it is the language of flirtation, it depends on felt desire in its raw form—insistent, straining, delighting in and surrendering to and searching out the concrete details. She has more hope than cummings will allow. While the lover who calls the woman may be a symbol of Christ to Christians or God to Jews, the main character of the Songs is not the woman's lover. It is undoubtedly the woman herself, and while she is young, she is not an innocent child to be comforted by a father figure who will keep her safe and secure. So the poet of the Songs offers a counter to Hopkins as well as cummings. It is this bold woman's desire and her trust in this desire that is felt most vividly in the Songs. And if you read the rest of the Songs, you discover that her felt desire is not easily resolved. Hers is not a love of blessed assurance. Thus, while she is more hopeful than St. Vincent Millay, she does not respond to her request for better answers with pat guarantees. The woman searches for her lover, she tries to answer his call, but she does not seem to find him nor is it clear that she is finally found. This is not to say that she is not truly both lover and beloved; it is only to avoid simplifying or sentimentalizing the desire and love that animates her.

What does it mean then to read the Songs in the spring at St. Olaf? Like the woman in the Songs, you are being caught up in something and called by an elusive promise. "It is spring," the voice says, "rise up and come away." This love that can animate us may not be easy or smooth, but it is there if we pay attention and respond, it is coursing through our lives, pulling us into its current, as sure as spring is coming and as sure as our lives will continue to unfold and, we hope and pray, blossom.