

“Depth: What do we mean when we speak of going deeper?”
Rev. Fran Dearman, Unitarian Church of Calgary, March 14th, 2010

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the **depth** and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.

I love thee to the level of every day’s
Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.

I love thee with a passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood’s faith.

I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints, I love thee with the breath,

Smiles, tears, of all my life! and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

I’ve been thinking about this word, ‘depth’, and what do we mean when we speak of going deeper? So I looked to where some poets take us. Then I recalled some personal experiences that touch on depth. Finally, I considered where thinking about depth might take us.

What do poets tell us about the meaning of depth?

There are a lot of poets. And new poets pick up their pens every day. I looked at just a few.

I chose to begin with the sonnets of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Then I sifted the sonnets of Shakespeare, and “The Tempest”, which was probably his last play. Then I dug into the venerable “Oxford Universal Dictionary on Historical

Principles” that resides in the minister’s study. Finally, a quick peek at depth in Greek and Latin literature and in the Psalms.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote one hundred and fifty years ago. She became famous both as a poet and as an adventurous spirit who ran away from home to marry the poet Robert Browning. We heard her most famous poem just now. That sonnet is number forty-three in a collection of forty-four, known as “Sonnets from the Portuguese”.

In this collection of sonnets, the word depth appears rarely, most often in an expression that links depth with feeling: “deep joy” (29.12), “deep thanks” (41.2), and depth as a measure of love (43.2).

I hesitate to read too much into what a poet might do with a few words. I do believe that a poet will do almost anything to make it rhyme.

What interests me is that Barrett Browning’s sonnets portray a progression away from illness and despair towards health and love. A riding accident in her teens led her to spend most of her time reclining on a couch. It was a big day when she stood up and went for a walk. With Robert Browning in her life, she found the courage to stand up and run.

For Barrett Browning, the low abasement of her illness and dependency is very different from how she speaks of depth. She speaks of her heart as something heavy (25.1) that falls into her lover’s heart. In her words, her heavy heart is allowed to “drop down thy calmly great/ Deep being” (25.10-11). And there her heart rests, protected, and nurtured towards some hoped for future (25.14).

For Barrett Browning, depth describes a measure of emotion, and she expects you to understand that with no difficulty. But more than that, depth is a good place, a place where treasures are kept safe, a present safety that promises future joy. Deep is good.

Who else wrote sonnets? Shakespeare. Lots of sonnets, more than a hundred and fifty sonnets. Very few of which work with a metaphor of depth. And being a sailor, I am especially looking for marine metaphors of depth.

Shakespeare does use a few marine metaphors, but they tend to be waves working horizontally, not depth; he speaks of the waves of the sea as measuring time and as

agents of erosion and decay. He speaks of ships and navigation to describe ambitions and relationships.

Shakespeare does describe the favour of a powerful benefactor as an ocean, where the poet's modest boat is floated in the shallows, and a rival's great ship is born up in deeper waters—a "soundless deep" (80.10).

By soundless he means unfathomable, so deep that one cannot measure how very deep it is. This sense of sound is not about hearing. It's about dropping a heavily weighted line to the bottom of the sea.

This sense of sound come from Old French, and from the Latin, so that sub-unda—under the wave—becomes sous-onde in the French, sous-onde, thus sound in English, to measure depth.

The sounding line is weighted with lead, and in Latin lead is *plumbum*, so one speaks of plumbing the depths. The lead-line is marked, and the place between the marks is named as deeps, so at the two fathom mark we hear "By the mark, twain", and at six fathoms, which is unmarked, we hear "by the deep, six".

Which is far more than you need to know about inshore navigation.

Richly confusingly, our English language.

Sometimes what we hear is not what someone meant to say; so always we need to listen carefully, and generously.

So—Shakespeare does use depth in the context of power and great favour that lifts up the friend as the sea floats a vessel. And Shakespeare does use depth as a measure of emotion.

In a sonnet that describes how two friends ought to forgive one another, the poet suggests that acknowledging mutual offence through mutual apology might lead to reconciliation. He writes, "O that our night of woe might have remembered/My deepest sense, how hard true sorrow hits" (120.9-10). By which he means that the quarrel should have reminded his "deepest sense"—his innermost feelings about the pain of estrangement.

Like Barrett Browning, Shakespeare expects us to understand what he means when he uses depth to describe emotion. Shakespeare can also use vivid imagery to take us further, to take us deeper, into the world of his story.

Let's look at "The Tempest", written approximately four hundred years ago. The Tempest is set on an enchanted island, surrounded by stormy seas, ruled by a magician named Prospero. There are two significant passages where Shakespeare works with an image of depth, one near the beginning and the other near the end. Let's take a look.

In the first act of the play, we hear Ariel's Song. Ariel is the airy spirit who does the magician's bidding. Ariel's task here is to distract a young man, just shipwrecked. Ariel tells the young man that his father is drowned, and lies at the bottom of the sea.

"Full fathom five they father lies,
Of his bones are coral made:
Those are pearls that were his eyes.
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange...
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell
Ding-dong
Hark!now I hear them—
Ding dong bell." (1.2.400-409)

Ariel's song is not true, but it is beautiful and compelling, rich with the imagery of precious jewels. Precious things lie cherished in the depths of the sea.

It is in the final act of the play that we hear another image of depth, this one used to describe renunciation. Prospero is setting aside his skills, to return to the world.

"But this rough magic/I here abjure.....(5.1.50-51)

I'll break my staff
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
And deeper than did ever plummet sound/

I'll drown my book. (1.5.54-57)

In the language of poetry, precious things lie safely guarded in the fathomless depths of the sea.

Shakespeare's sonnet trusted to his "deepest sense" for reconciliation. Elizabeth Barrett Browning trusted her heart to her lover's "calmly great/ Deep being". Prospero trusts his magic book to the deepest depths of the sea.

The Romantic poet, Thomas Gray, echoed that image in his Elegy:

"Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear." (Elegy, lines 53-56)

Precious things are guarded in the depths.

How far back can we look?

The Dictionary traces these words back to their earliest use. This too is depth—depth of scholarship and understanding, to seek out the details, to search out the evidence, to make a meaning that is more and more true, and carries knowledge forward.

As I understand it, the English language took the word deep from Old English, and depth from late Middle English, about five centuries ago.

The literal meaning of depth—the measure from the top down, from out to in, from front to back—quickly evolved into metaphoric meanings. By the fifteen hundreds we speak of the deeps of the sea and depths of earth, also of depth as a quality of understanding. We come to speak of depth of skill, depths of thought, depths of sorrow. Depth is solemn, grave, and serious, hard to fathom, not superficial but profound. Poets speak of the depths of hell (Dryden), deep woods, deep winter, the depths of unrecorded time (Shelley), and the measureless depths of air (Longfellow). Mourning is deep, as is disgrace, treachery, knavery, debt, and deep enemies. Low-pitched sound is deep. Intense colour is deep. Silence is deep, and the mind deeply absorbed.

I cast my mind farther back still, to Greek and Latin literature. I try to recall what my thesis of fifteen years ago on marine metaphor had to say about depth. As I recall, it didn't say much.

We form our figurative speech from what we know. The ancients knew mines in the earth. And they knew the sea was deeper than their fishing hooks and their stone anchors. They could think of depth in terms of a float on their nets bobbing in the waves. But their divers could only go as far as their own lungs could take them. I recall few marine metaphors in Greek or Latin that relate to the deeps of the sea.

There is another source from the ancient world: the Psalms, from the Bible, written in Hebrew about three thousand years ago.

What did I find about depth when I re-read the Psalms?

I remembered how deeply I enjoyed the language.

I remembered how deeply I value scripture. The Bible is part of my inheritance, to claim as and how I wish. Scripture is mine, as much as Shakespeare is.

I chose the Psalms as my sampling of scripture, because, like the sonnet collections of Shakespeare and Barrett Browning, they are both focussed and extensive. There are one hundred and fifty psalms, almost as many as Shakespeare wrote sonnets. They express a range of emotion, from joy to despair. How do they speak of depth?

I found many occasions where the psalms speak of death, illness, and despair in the terms of depth, generally through a figure of speech involving pits and snares. My personal favourite is the recurring theme where one digs a pit to entrap another, and falls into it oneself, caught in the snare we set for another person.

The psalms frequently mention depths in retelling the mighty deeds of the one they worship, the one who parted the waters of the Sea of Reeds to bring them out of Egypt, the one who set the limits to the sea at the creation of the world.

A person who had witnessed a major earthquake or tsunami, such as the recent upheaval in Chile or Haiti, might resonate with the poetry of the forty-sixth Psalm and its vision of cosmic unrest:

“Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea, /though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult”. (Ps 46.2-3)

The psalmist remembers the holy one as powerful to command the ordering of the cosmos. The psalmist echoes that memory when he cries out for a saving power that will order the limits of disaster. For the psalmist, the sea is the image of chaos; to remember mastery over the sea brings order and hope.

There are also still waters, waters of rest. Still waters run deep. (Ps. 23)

The psalms describe emotion in terms of depth. Despair is deep; knowledge is also deep, and thought, and judgement (Ps 36, 42, and 92).

One of the readings in our hymnal—an abbreviation of Psalm 42— shows how the psalmist writing in Hebrew three thousand years ago could link literal depth with emotional depth, and a past empowerment with the hope of future empowerment:

“As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.///
My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you.
Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts;
All your waves and billows have gone over me.
Why are you cast down, O my soul?
Hope in God.” (Ps. 42-SLT # 535)

I’m not sure what it means, “deep calls to deep”; but I know I’ve felt like that, somedays.

Enough of poets. What do I know of depth, from my own experience?

I was born and raised on Vancouver Island. I spent most of my life living within four blocks of the sea. I made my living on the great waters. I know a little about depth.

I know that if you gather a group of ships captains together for dinner, and then rattle a very large roasting pan or other metal object across a counter or floor, every one of them is likely to cringe. Sometimes the deeps aren't deep enough, and the deceptive waters hide pesky unexpected shoals!

I know that there is a small mountain tarn, Summit Lake, about an hour's drive outside Anchorage, Alaska. Suspended up in the peaks of Hatcher Pass, it gleams a steely silver in the sun. When I hear the words *de profundis*, out of the depths, I often think of that deep lake, hanging there, high in the mountains.

Psalm 130: "Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord....."

I have a friend in Alaska, a lawyer, who flies to Texas from time to time, to do some pro bono work for a man on death row. This man is on death row for a reason; he's done some terrible things.

My friend is trying to persuade some judges in Texas that this convict is still a human being, and that we demean ourselves as human beings when we deliberately take the life of another, even of a murderer. Especially when the murderer has an IQ of seventy-one. His name is Elroy.

Elroy sent my lawyer friend a Valentine this year. No one is just the worst things they ever did. So said a man named Suja Graham. Graham spent years on death row for a crime he did not commit. He lived for years among people who did commit ugly crimes, and he was able to see the better side of them.

De profundis.....

I know something else about depths.

I dumped a small sailboat once. I was sailing alone when it would have been wiser to have had a friend along for ballast. I will never forget the wonderful feeling of that lifejacket returning me to the surface. Nice.

You heard earlier about learning to snorkel at Aqaba. What I remember most of that time is the deep and peaceful silence once I found my way below the noisy distraction of the choppy water at the surface. That quiet beauty was well worth the effort. I learned not to give up too easily. I learned to go deeper. Nice.

How much deeper can we take this?

Poets can help us understand what they mean about depth, and going deeper.

Shakespeare, Gray, and Barrett Browning showed us that we can think of depth as guarding precious gems, and precious people, in a profound care.

And may we too create a calm depth of care for ourselves and all our precious ones, for friends and family, and for all whom we meet.

We might speak of such care in terms of maturity, meaning a cultivation or deepening of understanding and relationship.

In a congregational setting we might describe maturational growth as the process of deepening one's ties to a church, through such things as adult education, connection with people, volunteering, making friends, or finding more spiritual connection.

There will be a workshop here on congregational deepening in two weeks time. I would urge you to attend.

Our president, Jane Ebborn would be pleased to supply details. [ask Jane to stand]

In conclusion, our sense of depth begins with a physical sense of distance. Depth then becomes a measure of other qualities, of character, of the mind, or of emotion. And then we learn that some depths are measureless. And that a distance measured downwards implies a distance measure upwards. Somehow, together, they may take us forward.

May your paths take you to places of depth, and may you find those gems of purest ray serene. And if you find Prospero's book there, please let me know. And may you find deep peace there, also, and beauty.

May it be so.

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Bible verses were taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), the Oxford Annotated Bible, and the UUA hymnal “Singing the Living Tradition”.