

**A SERMON GIVEN BY REV. PAUL KOTTKE
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Sunday, July 13, 2008

Title: Reflections on Poetry: “All Souls” by May Sarton

Scripture: Revelation 22:1-6, 23-24

Theme: Our task as a community is to honor those who have preceded us, weaving themselves into the tapestry of our lives, that we might be a community of hope for the generation that will follow us.

Poetry that speaks to us gives us access to deep insights often in unexpected ways. The images and thoughts evoked encapsulated in but a few words represent a Truth that often is beyond rational analysis. And thus it is appropriate that in the midst of worship we allow poetry to speak to us as one way of expanding our faith.

May Sarton was born in Belgium in 1912. In 1916, along with her parents George and Mabel, she immigrated to the U.S. because of the advancing Nazis. Her father George Sarton was a highly respected historian of science and founded the scientific journal *Isis*, which continues to be published by the University of Chicago. Throughout her childhood, May was deeply committed to writing poetry, books, and journalistic prose. Her works have been strongly embraced by women’s studies programs across the country. One critic writes, “...the publication of [May’s] *Journal of a Solitude* in 1973 may be acknowledged as the watershed in women’s autobiography.”

Sarton rued the fact that for most of her writing life, the major critics and the literary establishment ignored or dismissed her work. Yet more than forty of Sarton’s books are still in print. The *Journal of a Solitude* has never gone out of print. Critical recognition, having come late in her life, has grown even after her death. Three of her memoirs in particular may be of interest: *At Seventy*, *Endgame: A Journal of the Seventy-Ninth Year*, and *Encore: A Journal of the Eightieth Year*. She referred to her aging as “being pushed towards the country

of old-age.” I imagine that a few of you could identify with that sentiment. A friend who cared for her in her dying years writes: “I think in a very important way May was ready to die. But the truth is, she was not ready to stop living...”

All Souls

*Did someone say that there would be an end,
An end, Oh, an end, to love and mourning?
Such voices speak when sleep and waking
blend,*

*The cold bleak voices of the early morning
When all the birds are dumb in dark*

*November –
Remember and forget, forget, remember.*

*After the false night, warm true voices,
wake!*

*Voice of the dead that touches the cold
living,*

*Through the pale sunlight once more gravely
speak.*

*Tell me again, while the last leaves are
falling:*

*“Dear child, what has been once so
interwoven
Cannot be raveled, nor the gift ungiven.”*

*Now the dead move through all of us still
glowing,*

*Mother and child, lover and lover mated,
And wound and bound together and
enflowing.*

*What has been plaited cannot be unplaited –
Only the strands grow richer with each loss
And memory makes kings and queens of us.*

*Dark into light, light into darkness, spin.
When all the birds have flown to some real
haven,
We who find shelter in the warmth within,
Listen, and feel new-cherished, new
forgiven,
As the lost human voices speak through us
and blend
Our complex love, our mourning without
end.*

The setting of her poem is that late autumn, early winter season “dark November” – “The cold bleak voices of the early morning when all the birds are dumb.” This dark season of the year is but a metaphor for that dark time in our life when anxiety seems strongest and hope weakest.

Yet “after the false night, warm true voices, wake!” Invariably, while our anxiety often is at its strongest in the darkness of the late night, [the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer has a prayer that calls for God’s protection from the “things that go bump in the night.”] morning sun reveals a truer voice, a voice that brings back a sense of hope.

This is also true of our relationships, even in the moment when we have lost a loved one due to death or illness, are we not reminded “Dear child, what has been once so interwoven cannot be raveled, nor the gift ungiven?” Yes, there is loss. But the gift of our relationship cannot be taken away. The gift of love always remains.

In our Christian faith, we speak of the Cloud of Witnesses, who urge us on in the faithfulness of our living. May Sarton speaks of it in this way:

*Now the dead move through all of us still
glowing,
Mother and child, lover and lover mated,
And wound and bound together and
enflowing.
What has been plaited, cannot be unplaited –
Only the strands grow richer with each loss.*

Surely this is the hardest lesson of life: Only the strands grow richer with each loss. The mystery of God’s wisdom is that loss does not lead into emptiness and weakness. Rather with each relationship where we have entered into love, even when that relationship comes to an end, we have grown richer for the experience of love.

And so we know the experience of mourning but we also know the experience of love, and it is our complex love that allows us to experience our mourning “without end.” There is a perpetual cycle within our living – the only way to be alive is to enter into this cycle. It is the nature of being alive. Did someone say that there would be an end, an end, Oh, to love and mourning? ... Remember and forget, forget, remember.

The national leader who selected this poem is Rev. Patricia de Jong. Rev. de Jong has been the senior pastor of Berkeley’s First Congregational Church since 1994. Prior to serving her current church in Berkeley, she served as Minister of Education at Riverside Church in New York City for ten years. She is also married to the author, Sam Keen. I have known Rev. de Jong for two years. First congregational Church and University Park UMC have a lot in common.

Patricia writes of an experience which every pastor has. She writes, “Standing in the pulpit on Sunday morning, I often look out and see people who are no longer with us seated in their usual pews.”

This is certainly true for me. I see Eleanor Lytle, Wilma Wagonblast, Sally Peck, Heather Dutton in the front row. In the fifth row back on the north side, I see Ray and Lois Driver. Back a couple more pews, are Frances and Bill Griffith. I see Gaston Santi able to slowly walk up the ramp and sit in the second pew of Wasser Chapel. I see Dona Rae Mills in her strength, free of her illness sitting on the north side. I see Jean Schalliol sitting with Herb. I know that she has double checked the Communion table linen to ensure that it is straight and wrinkle free. Margaret Van Houweling impeccably dressed. Others: Nicki Stoner, Phil Perdew...

Patricia goes on, "Living in and leading a spiritual community comes with the joy and cost of love and mourning." Our lives become interwoven together. There is a price that is paid but the sacred blessing is far greater. This is true not only for clergy but for all who risk

entering into the covenant of relationship. The community of friends of close friends.

Our task as a people of God who are committed to the community of church is to remember those who have become part of the Cloud of Witnesses, those who have woven themselves into the very fabric of our lives. Our task – to embrace the community that we are now with the mantel of hope and vision that has been given to us. Our task – to create such a community as this for the sake of the children whom we covenant with each baptism. In this, the past, the present, and the future, all souls are woven together.

"What has been plaited cannot be unplaited, the strands of our lives grow stronger with each loss...Our complex love, our mourning without end...Remember and forget, forget, remember."