

Musical prelude (Lizzy)

Greeting

1st hymn (everything possible, green hymnal 280)

reading (on the Freedom of the Will, Arthur Schopenhauer, 1839)

I can do what I will: I can, if I will, give everything I have to the poor and thus become poor myself—if I will! But I cannot will this, because the opposing motives have much too much power over me for me to be able to. On the other hand, if I had a different character, even to the extent that I were a saint, then I would be able to will it. But then I could not keep from willing it, and hence I would have to do so.

— Chapter III

[A]s little as a ball on a billiard table can move before receiving an impact, so little can a man get up from his chair before being drawn or driven by a motive. But then his getting up is as necessary and inevitable as the rolling of a ball after the impact. And to expect that anyone will do something to which absolutely no interest impels them is the same as to expect that a piece of wood shall move toward me without being pulled by a string.

Man can do what he wills but he cannot will what he wills

2nd hymn (you are always you, 7 blue)

joys and concerns

musical interlude (?)

reading (usually biblical)

Luke 6:35 King James Bible

But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil.

3rd hymn (lean on me, 317 green)

message

silent worship

4th hymn (come let us be joyful, 81 blue)

introduction, remembrances, afterthought (?)

postlude

Previous reading recap. Then:

It is only when I relegate my personality traits to useful flaws that I can have a clear conscience with regard to giving. When I give in hopes of something in return, it doesn't seem like 'pure' giving. When I can satisfy myself that I get nothing in return, and feel good about

myself, even superior, praising myself because of it, I see an even uglier personality trait. But when I see giving as a personality trait that I have no control over, something I am compelled to do because I cannot will what I will, then I can give myself over completely to the hedonistic pleasures of helping other people without regret, or begrudging other people, grateful or ungrateful, kind or unkind, for the wills they are slaves to.

Today I want to talk about two posters, connected to my mother's parents, that resonate with me. The first is a copy of Jean-Leon Gerome's 'Pygmalion and Galatea'. My grandfather, Poppy, put this poster on the door to his workshop, where he often carved wooden figures. The picture is inspired by Ovid's Latin poem, in which a Greek sculptor creates a statue of a woman so beautiful that the sculptor loses all interest in people, forsaking human company in favor of his creation. He prays to Aphrodite to find a girl who is like his statue, and when he kisses the lips of the statue, her lips are warm. He kisses her lips again, and they are soft, and in the third kiss, she embraces him.

I wouldn't be able to remember the poster very well, except that my wife, Arshia, has a calendar of art that she got from my sister Eva, with a different painting every day, and this painting appeared unexpectedly on the 21st of September. In the painting, which captures the moment of transformation, the statue is nude and carved out of marble, and we're facing her back. She has surprisingly modern looking short cropped black hair. She is standing in the middle of a cluttered pile of wooden stairs and boxes, on a piece of plywood, which is off-kilter relative to a crudely assembled wooden platform with peeling paint. The top half of her body is flesh covered, and the bottom half is still marble. The unformed stone still clings around her feet. She's leaning sideways in a passionate embrace with Pygmalion, who is dressed in some sort of blue peasant's robes that end at the knee, and wearing functional looking leather moccasins. Pygmalion is standing on tiptoe to just barely reach her lips. In the background are two ghoulish masks along the wall, with gaping mouths that look a little like comedy and tragedy, though neither is particularly pleasant. Cupid hovers on a cloud, releasing his arrow. Since I was very young the painting has always been captivating to me. At first I thought Poppy had it because of the beautiful woman. Later it seemed like the height of romantic love for a person to devote themselves completely to someone, with no hope of receiving anything back, wooing in vain in the surroundings of a dingy workshop. When I thought about it more deeply, there was also something remarkably unsettling about creating an ideal of beauty and then growing old with its living embodiment, which a god pre-ordained to love its creator. I'm not sure what Poppy saw in the poster exactly, but it seemed to have a link to the wood sculpting he was doing.

When I looked at this picture most recently, I was again captivated, and this time I saw a striking resemblance to my own work. Where Pygmalion toiled happily in a dingy workshop, meticulously chiseling away the layers, focusing on one area of unformed stone and then another, searching for the statue inside the block of marble, forsaking everything else, I see myself happily chiseling away at scientific truth, focusing my search on one area and then another, oblivious to my surroundings. I see myself building a beautiful idea on a humble, possibly unsteady pedestal, and falling in love with the idea I've created.

I think, like Pygmalion or other artists, I can't say honestly whether I'm finding the truth, the figurative statue trapped in the block, and loving the truths that I discover, or creating the statue from some inner recesses of my mind, and deceiving myself by falling in love with my own ideas, clinging desperately to my artistic vision. Like Pygmalion's art, I think what I do is useful, but if I'm honest, I don't do it because of the benefit it will bring to humanity, but because I can't help myself.

I don't know if art, and what I do by extension, is closer to the selfless pursuit of truth or the worst kind of self-engaged narcissism, but when I see that picture I recognize myself, reaching up ridiculously on tiptoe to earnestly kiss a statue, and I have to laugh at myself and feel lucky that someone is willing to pay me to pursue crazy ideas. I think I see the same ridiculous personality in other scientists, for better or for worse, and I feel like I've found a nice home in academia.

It's the ambiguity of personality traits that I want to think about today. Both the best and worst people with a tendency to get wrapped up in their work could be well-described by the story of Pygmalion, and to me, it seems like character flaws get a bad rap, when we should be celebrating them as the things that make us who we are, giving us a sense of identity and purpose. The opposite side of this is that the character traits that people are most proud of also seem to me to be the very same ones that make us ridiculous when they appear in a different context. We focus so much of our energy on trying to identify and eradicate our flaws, when I think what we should be doing is finding ways to gain an appreciation of the nature of those flaws, and how they could be best put to use. A flaw is just a personality trait that no one else happens to appreciate, and I take tremendous entertainment and comfort in trying to find ways of relegating all of my personality traits to flaws that I can appreciate.

Flaws are what make us human. The stability of human flaws (in spite of our efforts to eradicate them) is a wonderful thing. Flaws focus our goals and point us toward useful career paths. They give us a special kinship with others like us, and give us a niche to fill in our communities. They create a set of abilities that ensure that we will never have difficulty dealing with the things that are easy for us, while the things that are hard for us will be familiar and easily recognizable obstacles, and if we're not good at solving them, they can at least become our faithful, unwavering companions. Our unique, self-inflicted hardships let other people forgive us for our abilities, and they make it easier to anticipate the types of conflicts we'll face with others. I feel at my most connected to other people when I find shared flaws to laugh about, or when one of my strengths or weaknesses is complemented by someone else's unique talents, and we can trust each other enough to give and receive help without judgment.

It's in this spirit that I come to the second poster. One of many spiritual descendants of Pygmalion (according to Wikipedia) is the story of Frankenstein. Everything about that story also resonates with me as a scientist and person. I don't think it's an accident that the monster received the same name as the scientist, or that both the monster and his creator possess an innocence and purity of purpose that make them unable to come to terms with the grisly consequences of their actions. We are the monsters we create. The poster that my grandmother gave me, to this effect, when I was about to go off to college with big aspirations in my head, had a beautiful picture of a perfect sunset, framing a slowly sinking ship, with the caption: "MISTAKES: It could be that the whole purpose of your life is only to serve as a warning to

others.” It was sold by a company that makes demotivational messages, but to me, it’s one of the most comforting and inspiring messages I can think of, as a helpful counterpoint to the beautiful visions that drive so many of our actions.

Positive and negative traits are arbitrary, and I have no idea whether I’m living out the life of a deeply flawed, pathetically deluded Frankenstein, or engaging in a noble pursuit of knowledge, but this quote makes me think that in either case, I may be serving a useful function. Rather than framing life in terms of positive or negative traits, or claiming that our lives are meaningless, the message suggests that ultimately, regardless of whether we succeed or fail, our life story tells a potentially rich and valuable lesson in the collective history of human endeavor. When I remember this message, I think again of Pygmalion standing on tiptoe, not knowing if what he’s doing is the embodiment of selfless love, or a narcissist playing god, or just a silly man with a crazy obsession. I’m reminded that we can’t know, in the moment, if what we’re doing is beautiful or beautifully tragic or merely pointless, and that, for that matter, we are even less well-equipped to judge the actions and personality traits of other people. I’m reminded of my own insignificance, and that regardless of the outcome or ‘true’ motive, the urge to kiss a statue, and most other human pursuits and personalities, embody a kind of foolishness that connects me with all of humanity, and a weight lifts from my shoulders.