'A SIGHT OF HAPPINESS'

Thomas Traherne's Felicity in a Fleeting World

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WE WESTERN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY CITIZENS of the world speak much of survival, and we fight for it as never before. Medical advances increase our life expectancy year by year, and we hope for the eradication of disease. We campaign for the preservation of the rainforests, for a ban on hunting endangered species, for a reduction in pollution; we strive against global terrorism; we worry about the ozone layer as we smear our children with sunscreen and our bread with cholesterol-lowering spreads. Yet our own eventual demise is sure, delay it as we may; and for the endurance of the earth we can only hope. We live in a world destined, it seems, to run down; we live a life certainly poised for death. And still we seek 'fulfilment', individual happiness, as if the individual mattered. What can one person's happiness mean in the face of these larger concerns? Conversely, is there any meaning beyond immediate satisfaction?

Happiness seems a woolly kind of romantic notion, the province of poets and dreamers. So it may not be surprising to find that Thomas Traherne, the seventeenth-century priest and poet, makes happiness his major theme. Only, his happiness is not, as one might expect, something to be deferred to the afterlife. For Traherne, heaven is here as well as hereafter, and happiness is something we can begin to taste now. In our own century, the world-renowned scientist and priest John Polkinghorne has presented a theory that makes the physical resurrection a coherent hope and also gives the present moment concrete significance. When Traherne and Polkinghorne are read together they suggest a world in which individual human happiness may have real and lasting importance.

At various points in history the belief in human happiness has been challenged. In 1926 Adolf Hitler wrote boldly: 'The day of individual

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happiness has passed'.[1] But his bleak words contrast sharply with the hopeful ones written some years later by a young girl, one of the many Jewish people to have suffered so terribly under Hitler's regime, Anne Frank. In her diary entry for 7 March 1944, she wrote,

> I lie in bed at night, after ending my prayers with the words, 'Thank you God for all that is good and dear and beautiful' and I'm filled with joy. At such moments I don't think about all the misery but about the beauty that still remains. This is where Mother and I differ greatly. Her advice in the face of melancholy is: 'Think about all the suffering in the world and be thankful you're not part of it'. My advice is: 'Go outside, to the country, enjoy the sun and all nature has to offer. Go outside and try to recapture the happiness within yourself; think of all the beauty in yourself and in everything around you and be happy.'

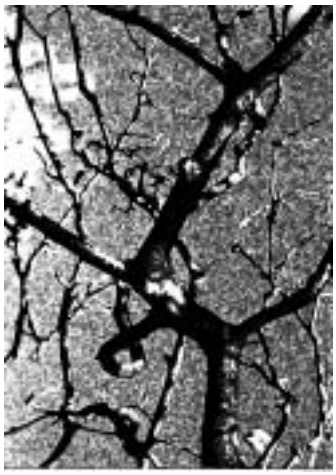
Anne Frank's voice echoes that of Traherne, who also lived in a time of competing ideologies which was beset by war. Frank admonishes us to 'go outside to the country', to 'enjoy all that nature has to offer' and to 'be happy'; likewise Traherne writes, 'A happiness there is, and it is my desire to enjoy it' (C IV 17).[2] He 'came into the country' deciding to spend his time 'whatever it cost in search of happiness', to devote himself 'wholly to the study of Felicity' (C III 46, III 52). Frank writes, 'recapture the happiness within yourself'; Traherne, 'the excellency is within'. For both of them happiness is a thing earnestly to be sought; for both happiness is linked to the enjoyment of nature; and both see a world of beauty within and without.

What else can we know about this man Traherne, with whom Anne Frank seems to share such an affinity? Like Herbert and Donne, Traherne stands in the tradition of the Anglican priest-poet.[3] Having published two works in his lifetime, neither of which won him an enduring following, he would have been lost to literature and theology if two of his manuscripts had not been discovered at the turn of the twentieth century. These were his poems, and his best-loved *Centuries*

[1] Quoted in W. H. Auden, *A Certain World* (London: Faber, 1971), 182.

[2] Traherne's works will be cited as follows: C, *Centuries of Meditations*; KOG, *The Kingdom of God*; SM, *Select Meditations*. All spellings and capitalisations have been modernised.

[3] The tradition continues into our own day in figures such as R. S. Thomas, David Scott and Rowan Williams.



of Meditations. The rest of his works trickled into the public domain throughout the twentieth century, the latest discoveries being made as recently as 1997.[4] He has been a favourite of noted twentieth-century Christian writers and thinkers such as C. S. Lewis, Thomas Merton, Dorothy L. Sayers and Elizabeth Jennings.

Traherne was a Herefordshire man and a man of letters. Though educated at Brasenose College, Oxford, in its Puritan heyday, he was a devotee of the national Church with its rituals, liturgy and bishops. Though he loved Plato and Aristotle, he was also enthusiastic about the arts and the new sciences. He was engaged in the important theological debates of his day, and known as a verbose, affable and pious man. He had imbibed much of what was best in the Puritan tradition, though he does not at all fit the caricature of the dour, pleasure-spoiling, world-denigrating and self-abasing Puritan we often imagine. He did not share the Puritan contempt for establishment, ceremonies and honours. Most significantly, he did not view the world as a wilderness to be avoided or subdued—as Bunyan, for example, did. His conviction that the world is good is perhaps Traherne's most eloquent gift to us.

Almost from the day of his birth, as soon as he could perceive, Traherne found the world beautiful:

> The world's fair beauty set my soul on fire.
> My senses were informers to my heart,
> The conduits of his glory, power and art.
> … and every sense
> Was in me like to some intelligence.[5]

[4] For details of these and other discoveries see Denise Inge and Cal Macfarlane, 'Seeds of Eternity: A New Traherne Manuscript', *Times Literary Supplement* (2 June 2000), 14; Julia Smith and Laetitia Yeandle, '"Felicity disguisd in fiery Words": Genesis and Exodus in a Newly Discovered Poem by Thomas Traherne', *Times Literary Supplement* (7 November 1997), 17; Peter Beal, *Index of English Literary Manuscripts*, volume 2 (1625-1700), part 2 (London: Mansell, 1993).

[5] 'Nature', lines 6-12, in Traherne, *Poems, Centuries and Three Thanksgivings*, edited by Anne Ridler (London: Oxford UP, 1966).

The more Traherne saw the usefulness of the works of nature—'the serviceableness of its parts'—the more beautiful the world appeared to him. In the newly-discovered manuscript *The Kingdom of God*, he writes: 'The most excellent things are the most common. Were there but one cup of water in all the world, a bushel of diamonds would be trash in comparison.' (KOG 266*v*) Generations before ecology and conservation issues made us consider again the value of our earth, Traherne wrote these prescient words:

> They rejoice in a piece of gold more than in the sun; and get a few little glittering stones and call them jewels. And admire them because they be resplendent like the stars, and transparent like the air, and pellucid like the sea. But the stars themselves which are ten thousand times more useful, great, and glorious they disregard. Nor shall the air itself be counted anything, though it be worth all the pearls and diamonds in the thousand worlds. A work of God so Divine by reason of its precious and pure transparency, that all worlds would be worth nothing without such a treasure. (C I 34)

In such a world of ordinary miracle, 'we need nothing but open eyes, to be ravished like the Cherubims' (C I 37). Not only is the natural world beautiful, but it is a source of revelation to him, a conduit of the divine. As the handiwork of God, Traherne's world shows to him the ways of the creator. It is alive to life, continually created and recreated. In the beauty of the natural world we may perceive God speaking to us. God is here, he says, God is with us. Traherne goes so far as to suggest that the natural world is,

> God's body, which the Deity hath assumed to manifest His beauty and by which He maketh Himself as visible, as it is possible He should. (C II 20)

The world's roundness and the universe's vastness betoken God's infinity:

> An infinite wall is a poor thing to express His infinity; a narrow endless length … were unprofitable; but the world is round, and endlessly unsearchable every way. … The distance of the sun, the altitude of the stars, the wideness of the heavens on every side passeth the reach of sight and search of the understanding. And whether it be infinite or no, we cannot tell. The eternity of God is so apparent in it, that the wisest of philosophers thought it eternal.

> We come into it and leave it as if it had neither beginning nor ending. (C II 21)

But God's attributes may be represented in the smallest thing as well as in the infinity of the cosmos:

> Suppose a river, or a drop of water, an apple or a [grain of] sand, and ear of corn or an herb: God knoweth infinite excellencies in it more than we: He seeth how it relateth to angels and men; how it proceedeth from the most perfect Lover to the most perfectly Beloved; how it representeth all His attributes. (C II 67)

Since every little thing speaks to us of the divine, we can never love the world or anything in it too much. 'O what a treasure is every sand when truly understood! Who can love anything that God made too much?' (C II 67) Loving the world too much is not the problem, says Traherne, but loving it too little, or in the wrong way, or for the wrong ends: 'What a world would this be, were everything beloved as it ought to be!' (C II 67)

All of this love of creation, its smallest grain of sand and its widest realms, is rooted in Traherne's larger quest for happiness. His great

theme is *Felicity*—a mutually beneficial happiness that both pleases us and is a glory to God—and it would be foolish to try to understand his reverence for creation apart from his quest for happiness. Traherne takes present happiness so seriously that he is suspicious of those Christians who would defer happiness until heaven, since we are commanded to have our conversation in heaven now. If happiness is something we should desire at the last, it is also something we should desire now. *Now* we are to be 'full of joy and full of glory' (C IV 9).

We are created to be happy, claims Traherne; it is 'the Glory of God' to make us so.[6] We come into this life happy and free. Happiness is our natural condition. Yet Traherne's own happiness was also something he earnestly sought, studied hard to discover and pursued 'no matter what it cost him'. It seems, then, that there was an experience of loss in Traherne's happy life. In his third Century, which contains many elements of autobiography, Traherne recounts moments both of great plenitude and of deep longing, the presence and the absence of God; it seems that at times he did hear the silence of the God who may not answer but is still there. But these apophatic moments were temporary; not for him Vaughan's 'dazzling darkness'. We are left with a question: did his writings about happiness resonate most deeply with his experience of life, or with his driving hope? Is the Affirmative Way for him an expression of his bounty, or of his need? It is both, I believe. For Traherne's happiness is fullness replenished. It is about wanting and having and wanting again, need satisfied and desire renewed. His happy person is never satiated, dulled and stilled by gorgeous plenty; nor are they ever, in the long term, left bereft.

Traherne's happiness is fullness replenished

In all of this, Traherne's greatest inspiration towards happiness was the natural world. Why should nature be such a source of happiness for Traherne? It is so not only because of its beauty or its usefulness, nor only because of its capacity to show the hand of God writ large and writ in miniature, but also because nature participates so precisely in this cycle of fullness replenished. In its cycles and seasons, the natural world is at once complete and still becoming, ever the same and ever new. 'The eyes of Heaven', says Traherne, are upon us all 'from one

[6] 'The best of all possible ends is the Glory of God, but happiness was that I thirsted after. And yet I did not err, for the Glory of God is to make us happy.' (C III 39)

end of the year unto the other', as creatures 'sacrifice their essences, and perish to support' human life'. 'The sun and all the stars dance attendance … the flowers are ambitious to please.' And human beings, who are 'conceived with pleasure, & come forth of the womb to innumerable blessings', are 'always blessed they go out, and when they come in'.[7]

Traherne would have us see our place and the place of all things in the universe. 'All things were made to be yours, and you were made to prize them according to their value' (C I 12), he asserts. 'Everything is ours that serves us in its place.' (C I 14) Not only do things have a place, they also have a meaning. Every living thing speaks in some way of eternity. 'Eternity was manifest in the light of the day, and something infinite behind everything appeared', Traherne writes. He seems to see 'the patterns which all things living are forever weaving'.[8]

There are woven patterns of time and season, of habit or ritual, of meaning and symbol. Integral to these woven patterns is the act of memory. The pattern must be known and remembered if it is to be repeated. The tree may 'remember' in its genetic code; the rabbit in his instinct; the person, most particularly, in their mind; and all of us are remembered in the mind of God as we weave again the patterns of our created and creative lives. It may well be in the end that the patterns we have woven are what are most entirely us.

Even our bodies may be most essentially their patterns. The material of our bodies is constantly changing—the atoms in our bodies now are not the same atoms that were there a few years ago—and yet we are recognisably ourselves. John Polkinghorne writes of the science of our changing bodies, 'the real me is an immensely complicated "pattern" in which these ever-changing atoms are organized'. And then he connects this with the resurrection: 'It seems to me to be an intelligible and coherent hope that God will remember the pattern that is me and recreate it in a new environment of his choosing, by his great act of resurrection'.[9]

[7] KOG, taken from *Thomas Traherne: Poetry and Prose*, edited by Denise Inge (London: SPCK, 2002), 113-114.

[8] Edward Thomas, *The South Country* (London: J. M. Dent, 1993), 103.

[9] John Polkinghorne, *Quarks, Chaos and Christianity: Questions to Science and Religion* (London: SPCK, 1994), 92, quoted in John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 142.

Polkinghorne's theory or 'coherent hope' seems to me to carry Traherne's thoughts on nature and memory into a new sphere. Polkinghorne enables us to see memory not just as a storehouse of the past but also as a warehouse in the present containing the building blocks of the future. Individual memories and collective memories, the memories of tribe and nation, of cultures and creeds, of a neighbourhood, a family, a school, a parish, memories, whether private or shared—all of these are the stuff of human and divine creativity.

Time and time again nature is the field of memory for Traherne. Why should this be? In *The South Country*, Edward Thomas reflects on Traherne's childhood memories and experience of nature. Nature is Traherne's field of memory, he suggests, because 'her solitudes are the most rich'.[10] Thomas notes that in childhood one is most often in the company of other children or of adults, and that company or community involve the spirit in some sacrifice. In the solitude of nature, however, the spirit is more open to what may be regarded as spiritual intercourse than it is in company. More importantly, he suggests, our childhood memories of nature are immediate, uncluttered by adult interlocution:

> But above all, our memories of Nature, are seldom or never flawed by the seeming triviality, the dislikes, the disgusts, the misunderstandings which give to memories of human society something of dullness and the commonplace …. Thinking of ourselves in a great wood or field of flowers ever so long ago, it is hard not to exaggerate whatever give-and-take there was between the spirit of the child and the vast pure forces of the sun and the wind. In those days we did not see a tree as a column of dark stony substance supporting a number of green wagers that live scarcely half a year, and grown for the manufacture of furniture, gates, and many other thing; but we saw something quite unlike ourselves,

[10] Thomas, *The South Country*, 106.

> large, gentle, of foreign tongue, without locomotion, yet full of life and movement and sound of the leaves themselves, and also of the light, of the birds, and of the insects; and they were givers of clear, deep joy that cannot be expressed. The brooding mind easily exalts this joy with the help of the disillusions and the knowledge and the folly and the thought of later years.[11]

What Thomas is proposing is that the memory of experience is as significant as the experience itself. So it is not just the direct experience of nature that gives Traherne such a source of happiness, but the memory, the taste of it lingering in his mouth. It is the reflection on nature's individual merits and overall worth, and on the connectedness of all things interior and exterior, that makes it such a rich spring. It is in the memory that one may see the meaning of the thing. Writing of Psalm 78, and its command that God's glorious deeds and wonders should be passed on from generation to generation, Traherne comments that these divine actions—or 'ancient ways',

> … are not to be seen in the visible world, but only in the memory and minds of men. The memory and mind are a strange region of celestial light, and a wonderful place, as well as a large and sublime one, in which they may be seen. (C III 89)

The memory of happiness is a part of that happiness. 'I recall many scenes', Thomas writes:

> … a church and churchyard and black pigs running down from them towards me in a rocky lane—ladslove and tall, crimson, bitter dahlias in a garden—the sweetness of large, moist yellow apples eaten out of doors—children: I do not recall happiness in them, yet the moment that I return to them in fancy I am happy.[12]

It may have been memories of this sort that Anne Frank was trying to reach through her journal. When access to the natural world was denied to her she retained the memory of its invigorating beauty.

Traherne writes:

[11] Thomas, *The South Country*, 99.
[12] Thomas, *The South Country*, 99.

> A sight of happiness is happiness. It transforms the soul and makes it heavenly, it powerfully calls us to communion with God.' (C III 60)

A sight of happiness. Something both seen and savoured, immediate and remembered. But there is more to Traherne's happiness than happy experiences of nature remembered. There is something active—an application of the imagination. This is likewise what Anne Frank alludes to when she admonishes her readers to 'enjoy' and 'recapture' happiness within themselves. Where Frank's mother advises her to 'think', Frank herself advises her reader to 'go'—go outside, go to nature. And yet she could not go herself. She could not go beyond the cramped rooms in which her family hid. At times she could not even see the light of day, though in her imagination she could do so much.

Traherne is similarly restless. 'The soul is made for action', he writes, 'and cannot rest till it be employed. If therefore you would be happy, your life must be as full of operation as God of treasure.' (C IV 95) What is this operation of the soul? There are many actions or deeds that Traherne commends to his reader: enjoying the world, loving the world and all created things, loving another's soul, seeing everything with the eyes of heaven, living a life of virtue. What we do now matters:

> … it ought to be a firm principle rooted in us, that this life is the most precious season in all eternity, because all eternity dependeth on it. Now we may do those actions which hereafter we shall never have occasion to do.

Now we may risk, with faith and hope, with difficulty and danger, a life of virtuous action, before faith and hope are swallowed up in perfect sight. We may live life now, with its own unique opportunities, as a particular stage of that larger eternal life,

> So piecing this life with the life of Heaven and seeing it as one with all eternity, a part of it, a life within it: strangely and stupendously blessed in its place and season. (C IV 93)

One particular thing we can do now that we cannot do later is to enjoy this world and to return to God from it the works of our imagination. 'The world within you is an offering returned' writes Traherne, 'very delightful in flowing from Him, but much more in

returning to Him'. This is because 'God hath made you able to create worlds in your own mind which are more precious unto Him than those which He created' (C II 90). 'That power to create worlds in the mind is the imagination, and is the proof that the creature liveth and is divine.'

What our minds do in the acts of memory and imagination—remembering and creating—is a participation in the creative act of God. And this creative act is not just a past event. Creation is continuous; matter is formed and reformed over and over again. In our bodies, in the life cycles of plants and animals, in the whole earth, fullness is replenished. Our minds create whole worlds, both in imagination and in memory, and offer them back to God. But where memory and imagination deal with the mind and to some extent the spirit, resurrection deals with the whole person, body included. Polkinghorne writes:

Matter is formed and reformed over and over again

> The old creation was a creation *ex nihilo*. The new creation will be something different; it is a creation *ex vetere*, for it is the transmutation of the old consequent upon its free return to its Creator.[13]

Here, where we do not have the divine power to act, we must have the human power to hope. For the powers of memory and imagination that we have been given are tokens of the greater power that God will exercise in the resurrection of the body, for you and for me and for all creation.

The immediate end of Anne Frank, despite her hopeful words about happiness, was early and tragic—a death camp. The immediate end for Traherne, whose vision of felicity fired his prolific work, was also an early death. We know our own mortality and see the signs of disease on our earth. It is not hard to imagine the eventual end of life on our planet. How then can we talk of hope? We hope not for the preservation of life, our own or the world's; we hope in the resurrection. That is the Christian hope. Polkinghorne writes of a hope for all creation, for a new heaven and a new earth and for human

[13] John Polkinghorne, *Serious Talk: Science and Religion in Dialogue* (Valley Forge, Pa: Trinity Press International, 1995), 108.

beings within them—all created from the stuff of which we are now made:

> Where will this new 'matter' of this new world come from? I suppose that it will come from the transformed matter of this present world, for God cares for all of His creation and He must have a destiny for the universe beyond its death, just as He has a destiny for us beyond ours.[14]

> Jesus' risen body is the transmuted and glorified form of his dead body. This tells us that in Christ there is a destiny for matter as well as for humanity. In fact, our destinies belong together, precisely because humans are embodied beings.[15]

Embodied beings. Our own embodiment reminds us of the unavoidable importance of the physical. The world matters. This is not just because it is our home, and as such meets the material requirements of our embodied selves as well as the spiritual and emotional need that we have to belong to a particular place. The world also matters because it is a beautiful and complex organism in its own right, because it is a manifestation of God's creative bounty—for Traherne it is 'God's body'. The rich goodness of creation extends beyond the beauties and bounties of harvest that we enjoy, again and again; the regular replenishments of creation's fullness speak to us prophetically of death and of resurrection—the earth's, each other's, and our own.

But what of individual human happiness—its fleeting moments and its ordinary hours? How can it hope to survive if our destiny can never be survival? And yet our happiness does matter, yours and mine; moreover, this happiness can indeed come about. It matters because it is one small thread in the

[14] Polkinghorne, *Quarks, Chaos and Christianity*, 93.
[15] Polkinghorne, *Serious Talk*, 108.

whole pattern that God's world is weaving, a thread without which the pattern is forever marred. It can come about because of grace—immeasurable divine generosity around us, under us, above us continually. The world has been created good, and we have been given a time in which to enjoy that goodness—to revel in it, savour it, relish it and return it back to God, by our senses, by our actions, by our thoughts. Occasionally we may be given the chance to right a wrong; daily we are given more mundane choices. In all of these we have been given the power to alter, in some small way, the pattern of things.

Let us not pretend, then, that our happiness, our brokenness and our choices do not matter. 'This life is the most precious season in all eternity, because all eternity dependeth on it', wrote Traherne (C IV 93). If every grain of sand may show the glory of God, then every moment of human happiness may herald heaven. 'The ultimate destiny of the whole universe is sacramental', writes Polkinghorne. 'What is known locally and occasionally will then be known globally and forever.'[16] We have been given the power to know the beauty that is in us and in the world around us, and to create whole worlds in our imaginations and in our memories that we may offer back to God. We have been given the power, by God's grace, to change and to be changed forever. And so we may become not just recipients but active participants in the larger pattern of resurrection. That, in the end, is what we were made for; it is our destiny.

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[16] Polkinghorne, *Serious Talk*, 108.