

**The Wish to Soar That Gave the Gods Their  
Wings**  
**The Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson**  
**February 21, 2016**

A few days ago, I "came across" a pile of old papers.  
It was sitting around "somewhere" -  
in a box,  
in a file,  
in my imagination,  
it doesn't matter.  
Storyteller's license at work here.  
But there was this pile of old papers.  
You know how it is.

Family records, scraps of this and that, pictures.  
All from about just over 100 years ago.  
And there were letters.

I "found" this letter.  
I want to read it to you; it's long.  
Almost the right length for a sermon -  
a remarkable coincidence.

May 3rd, 1912

Dear Father,

Of course you have heard, there in Rockford, Illinois,  
of the horrible tragedy at sea some weeks ago.  
Who could have imagined that this supposedly  
indestructible vessel,  
the Titanic - that name now so ironic and painful -

who could have imagined that it would be sunk by a piece of ice.

So many dead.

It bears me a heavy heart to tell you that among the dead, it seems,

was my dear friend Richard Jones.

He was returning from a visit to his aunt and uncle, near Edinburgh,

and on a whim decided to make the auspicious voyage.

You met Richard when you visited me here in New York last year,

of course, and I know you enjoyed his wit and energy as much as I did.

It is a great loss to his fiancé, Beth, and we are all sad for her.

The funeral, last week, was a beautiful service, but there was much weeping and wondering.

The great tragedy in general, and the particular loss, has made me wonder greatly myself.

Now I seem to be an adult, whatever that means, and I do not know what to make of this world.

I thought, as so many of us did, that the world was inexorably improving,

that science and discovering would take us into a brave new age.

Yet now I wonder if that is true.

We have explored the last frontier, and perhaps we have reached the limit of human power?

And at the same time,

the news from Europe speaks of alliances and rivalries

- it needs only some spark - the foolish assassination of some duke or such -

and it could be war, with machines we have never  
before seen.

I apologize, Father, for such dark portends.  
But it has me thinking, and I wonder what it is we are  
to make of this thing, our lives.  
I feel, truth be told, unsettled.  
That I am restless, and missing something.  
I think of making some adventure myself,  
to sail off through night and day,  
and in out of weeks,  
to find some wildness in the world, or in me;  
to confront and tame the monsters of the world.  
To make them dance, and to dance with them.  
And other times, I feel like coming home.  
That I might find, there with you, my supper waiting,  
still hot.

Do you feel this restlessness yourself, father?  
I wonder about you.  
Since mother died, what has kept you busy?  
Where have you found meaning in the world?  
Have you found solace in the church, as some seem  
to?  
Or have you found your peace in some other place?  
Or is there no peace, only fierce unrest?  
Desire for the past to be different?

I am wishing for something.  
Something more.  
I met a man here recently - like me, from Illinois -  
a newspaper columnist.  
But he is also a poet, and he recited some lines  
of a poem he is working on -

it hasn't been published yet, but he hopes to make a collection in a year or two.

A fierce unrest seethes at the core of all existing things,

It was the eager wish to soar

That gave the gods their wings.

That's the first stanza.

The last, he thinks, will go like this:

I sing no governed firmament,

Cold, ordered, regular—

I sing the stinging discontent

That leaps from star to star!

I feel that stinging discontent,

and I am trying to sing it.

To embrace the searching,

the desire for something more, something of meaning and purpose.

Some freedom, or perhaps not a freedom at all,

but a bond, a commitment to some ideal.

I have been talking with my friends and neighbors here about this desire, and this longing.

One of them invited me to a spiritualist gathering.

The medium, a distinguished looking older woman, sat in a trance, and spoke out words.

Only some made sense,

but the audience was enraptured.

There was a banging, and much moaning and sighs.

She claimed to be channeling the spirits of the dead, and asked if anyone had lost someone recently they wished to speak to.

I thought of asking for Richard,  
but demurred. He would have laughed, had he known.  
I did, I must admit, feel something of power in the  
room,  
there was an energy there - an electricity of some kind  
- but it did not seem to me worthy of more of my time.

Another friend said that if it was electricity I was  
looking for,  
I should come to the boxing match with him.  
That is where I would find what I was looking for -  
energy, passion, excitement.  
I went to the match, and it was exciting,  
but brutal.  
It did make me think of the joy I used to have  
when I was young, and would run through the woods,  
and swim in the lake,  
the joy of movement, of action.  
And I have gone to the Y.M.C.A. here in town,  
even played this new sport - Basketball they call it -  
and though it feels good, and I will keep doing it,  
it isn't quite what I am seeking.  
It does not fill the empty place.

Another has suggested to me that the answer to my  
desire, the solution to my melancholy,  
is to be found in science.  
There are so many discoveries, she said,  
in biology and geology and astronomy —  
that the search for meaning, the curiosity of the  
scientific spirit, is a way to channel my fierce unrest  
and put it to good use.  
I am considering - I think I have the aptitude for it,

and perhaps it is a way to make a contribution to the world, something that will live beyond my own life. I am aware, with the sinking of the great ocean liner, that we do not live forever, and wish to do something that matters. But no matter how many theorems I learn or rocks I classify, I am not sure this will answer my spiritual hunger, my longing for grace.

I did not find, as you know, the church that we attended in Rockford to be persuasive. The creeds were too old for me, and the ritual too stilted. It did not help that the sermons were in Swedish, which I hardly speak, despite mother's best efforts. I know you have said, father, that you have stopped going regularly yourself, after the funeral.

But perhaps there is some other form of religious expression that might meet my desire for meaning. I have heard of this new movement - it began some seven years ago in Los Angeles, with speaking in tongues and wild dancing — very different from our Swedish Lutheranism! There was a Pentecostal revival here in New York a few weeks ago, people of every race — white and black and brown, even some of the laborers here from China, clapping and singing and stomping. I slipped in the back with other curious onlookers. Some stood aside, arms crossed, watching. But others caught the energy and gave themselves over.

Don't worry, father, I did not fall down in the aisle!  
But I felt that tingle of energy - of a deeper power.  
And I could see how it answered the call for some.  
Something in me longs for the holy.  
For God, maybe, though I am not sure what that word  
means.

As a deer thirsts for water, I thirst for you, God -  
so says the psalmist, I remember,  
and I do thirst, for God, or for something like that -  
some feeling of being held and directed.  
But I am not sure that I believe, or trust, that notion.  
So I do not think I will find a religious home in the  
orthodox or in the new-fangled.

I have also been to visit the Unitarian church in  
Brooklyn, Second Unitarian they call it.  
Above the door are carved the words "The Truth Shall  
Make You Free."

It is more rationalist than the Church of the Christian  
Union, Dr. Kerr's church there in Rockford,  
which we visited a few times together.  
But it is similar in the embrace of progress, science,  
and justice.

One of the members of this church is Mary White  
Ovington, though she is rarely present, so often is she  
traveling the country speaking about the organization  
she co-founded some three years ago,  
the National Association for the Advancement of  
Colored People.

It is, in some eyes, a scandal —  
the notion that people of African descent might be  
treated equally in society,  
that the races might dine together, work together,  
even live in the same neighborhoods.

Ms. Ovington has the audacity to claim that these lives, these black folks, that their lives matter.

But I agree with her, and have been to some of the meetings she has called in this city.

I am inspired by this struggle.

In my search for a life of meaning, perhaps this work: the work of peace and justice might be a piece of the journey. Something essential.

But it is not everything.

There is something more, father.

Last weekend, I took the train up the Hudson into the valley and went for a long walk.

I found myself soon enough in the woods here, which remind me so much of the woods back home.

Despite the tragedy at sea, and the longing of my heart, and all that worries, it is still spring.

The leaves have come to the trees, in their bright green, and the lilies have popped up through the ground. There is a beauty out there in the wilderness of the world, and for a moment, I laid aside my restlessness, and was held in the grace of the world.

I did feel free - of the worries and troubles too much with me, and felt as though I could fly.

I have written you a long letter, father,

and I wonder if it makes any sense to you at all.

Perhaps it is just those of us in new cities and far from home who feel restless and desire something beyond what we have felt.

Or maybe it is something integral to the human soul.

My friend to poet maybe is right -

that a fierce unrest, a desire for action and meaning  
both, does seethe at the core of all existing things.  
And I wonder now if my search for a destination is a  
mistake -  
that this unrest, this longing for the holy and for a life  
that counts, isn't a place one arrives at,  
but is a method.  
Perhaps it is the search itself that is the place of  
connection;  
perhaps it is when we are honest with ourselves  
that we desire;  
perhaps it is when we admit we have a wish to soar  
that we gain our wings;  
perhaps it is when we embrace the struggle and the  
journey that God, or the spirit, or the just the universe  
itself, becomes most present to us.  
I thought that one of my friends would bring me to a  
place where my longing would be answered,  
but maybe it is with them, walking along the city  
streets, talking and laughing and wondering together,  
that is what I am seeking.  
Companions for the journey, this journey of life.

Father, you are this day in my prayers -  
though not sure what I might be praying to,  
I feel still the desire to hold you in love and good  
wishes.  
I think of you, back home, often.  
I hope that your own longing, your own fierce unrest,  
is alive in you.  
That you have friends for the journey,  
and that you walk in the woods and rest in the grace of  
love beyond our naming.  
I hope that you feel free,

and that you feel bound:  
free to range and explore,  
bound to the quest for truth.

Pray for me, too, father.  
I do not care who you pray too,  
but hold me in your best thoughts.  
I grieve my friend, and wonder what shall come of our  
modern world;  
so brave we are and so foolish, too.  
Yet I am encouraged, after writing this letter,  
encouraged by the unrest of our hearts,  
that we still search, and wonder, and long -  
that we are not content.  
This is, in the end, our source of hope,  
what will carry us from what is to what will be.

With great affection,  
Your son.

That's the letter.  
There was, attached to this letter,  
a portion of a poem.  
I do not know if the son sent it along to the father,  
or if the father attached it to the letter,  
having thought of it after reading his son's thoughts.  
But I thought I might read it to you to:  
it is a small portion of Whitman's Song of the Open  
Road,  
published some 60 years before this letter would have  
been written.

He wrote:  
Allons! whoever you are come travel with me!

. . .

The earth is rude, silent, incomprehensible at first,  
Nature is rude and incomprehensible at first,  
Be not discouraged, keep on, there are divine things  
well envelop'd,  
I swear to you there are divine things more beautiful  
than words can tell.

Allons! we must not stop here,  
However shelter'd this port and however calm these  
waters we must not anchor here,

Allons! the inducements shall be greater,  
We will sail pathless and wild seas,  
We will go where winds blow, waves dash, and the  
Yankee clipper speeds by under full sail.

I did not find, in these materials, the letter that I'm  
sure the father wrote back to his son.  
It is lost to time,  
but we can imagine, can't we, a response?  
I suspect that the father would have affirmed the core  
insight:  
that we do not arrive at some place where our longing  
is answered, or our thirst sated.  
The deer longs for water, and I long for you, the holy.  
But the deer must drink many times a day, not just  
once.  
And our search for lives of meaning, for connection to  
the power beyond our names;  
for the peace of wild things;  
for freedom and grace and love;  
our search goes on,

and we rest in the grace of the desire itself,  
as the winds blow, the waves dash, and the Yankee  
clipper speeds by under full sail.

I shall pray for you, says the son, though I know not to  
whom.

Pray for me, he asks, though I care not to whom.  
But hold one another, with tender compassion, in our  
best wishes.

As we travel, together and apart, as we seek, as we  
discover, as we seek again,  
as we long, as we are restless and when, in those  
moments here and there,  
we are held.

Let us sing.