

Meeting Your Heart's Longing
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I want to know what you ache for
and if you dare to dream
of meeting your heart's longing.

If you dare to dream of meeting your heart's longing.

The adventure of being alive.
True to yourself.
If you can be with failure,
and shout to the moon,
"Yes!;"
opened by life's betrayals,
not shriveled up.

Stand in the center with me and not shrink back.
I want to know if you can be alone with yourself
and if you truly like the company you keep
in the empty moments.

Invitation.
That's what this poem is called,
invitation.
That's our theme, invitation.
Come and go with me,
to that land for which we are bound.
Dare to dream of meeting your heart's longing.

Once upon a time,
I found myself in one of those surprisingly deep conversations.
You know the ones -

you are sitting around a table
out in the backyard
as the sun goes down on a late summer night.
You've talked about the kids and the news and the weather
and the vacation you took and the job that keeps you busy.
And there's that moment, when folks might stand up and go
home,
but in that pause, in that silence,
folks settle.
And the conversation turns.

Emily, Tyler, Mary, Sam, and me.
Listen to the noises - insects and the occasional cars, the wind
-
listen to the conversation and the pauses,
see the hands and the hearts.
I don't remember exactly how we got there,
but it was Sam who opened up the pathway.
I think Mary remarked that he seemed happy,
at ease with himself
in a way she hadn't noticed in a while.
Less stressed out.

He brightened.
You know, I do feel lighter.
Less angry with the world, less afraid.

A while back, Sam was in a bad spot.
He was angry a lot.
He'd sort of sit there quietly, stewing,
and then blow up at random.
Not unlike the Sam in our story,
who sat there and then let it all out to Leonardo:

his stolen and broken action figure,
the stubbed toe
the bird poop on his head,
"and I don't have any friends and my tummy hurts."
A grown up version of that.
Sam was stressed out.
He worried about money and his job.
If he felt disrespected, he'd fume and then curse out someone
else.
He was particularly volatile in the car in traffic.

That night in the backyard, he told us,
I was mostly just afraid.
He said he was afraid of losing.
The thing he thought he would lose would vary -
one moment, it was his job,
the next, his way of life;
he worried his wife, Emily, would leave him -
she was there that night, remember,
and the look on her face said
that they'd had that conversation,
that his worry was exaggerated but not fantastical,
but that it had somehow passed.
Mostly, he was afraid of losing little things -
the 10 minutes wasted in traffic and he'd curse like George
Carlin,
a 2 dollar late fee on the utility bill turned him from Bruce
Banner to the Hulk.

What changed?
Sam couldn't tell us exactly.
He took a little vacation with Emily,
and cleared his head. Stepped away from the routine.

Watched less TV, read more books.

Breathed.

He had lunch with an old friend one day
who told him,
look, your serious fears are unreasonable
and your genuine fears just aren't that important,
and whatever it is, you'll be alright.

He let go of what was done and couldn't be changed.

He let go of what wasn't yet and would come in time.

Just started, day by day, to live with less fear
and more with the adventure of being alive.

He was thinking about what he wanted to do with his time,
his energy -

instead of investing it in fear, he could take his sometimes
overactive imagination

and do something creative, or useful.

The journey was ahead of him,

and he wasn't afraid.

And we all said, we noticed.

He was answering the invitation to meet his heart's longing.

Day by day.

His story seemed to invite those of us around the table
to tell our own story, too.

Stories do that, right?

Mary, who'd asked Sam

what was different, and started this topic,
spoke next.

She started in the abstract:

about how, yes, the good life

the successful life,
isn't about holding on to things,
but is about earning the respect of others,
and leaving the world better,
to laugh often and much,
to say yes to love and life.

We all nodded.
It felt like a kind of benediction, a good word,
to Sam's story.
But then Mary surprised us.

She had a new neighbor, about a year ago,
she said,
a family — dad, mom, two teenage boys.
They'd moved from an apartment across town
into their first home.
They were sweet people,
she said.

The younger boy had a great sense of humor,
the older one had helped her take some old furniture to
Goodwill.

She'd had the parents over for dinner,
and they'd done the same with her.
Good, decent, hardworking folks.
But a year ago, when they moved in,
Mary had thought — well, she wasn't proud of it.
She hesitated here, telling the story,
but I guess that atmosphere of honesty was in the air,
and she told it -
she'd thought, hell, my property value just dropped.
Maybe I should move.

She made sure her door was locked and thought about getting an alarm system.

Because, well,
the family new to next door, they were black.
And they hadn't just moved from an apartment,
they'd move from a housing project.
With teenage boys.

We could tell Mary was troubled to tell this story,
so we just held the space that night,
but we also knew, at least I knew,
that her story is common.
At least she was being honest.
This wasn't something from a long time ago, it was now.

Mary said, you know what changed?
It was a news story on the radio
about one of the recent officer-involved shootings,
and someone said, "well, under the law, if the officer was
afraid, then the shooting is justified,
even if the person he was afraid of was unarmed."
And some part of Mary's brain said, that's not right;
unreasonable fear shouldn't be a death sentence.
And then she stopped.
And she was hit with the weight of it.
Fear shouldn't be an excuse.
She was ashamed, and resolved
that day not be governed by fear.
She said to herself, "I will not be afraid of black people."
It isn't always easy, she said -
decades, nay, centuries, of social conditioning don't go away at
once.
Spending time with the family helps a lot -

breaks down stereotypes and reminds her of her vow.

She's answered the invitation to a fuller humanity,
the invitation to move past her failures, and society's divisions,
and try, day by day, to be in community.

We who listened felt the power of that vow.

"I will not be afraid."

Of people we've been taught to be afraid of,
of people who are different than us,

I will not be afraid.

I will answer the invitation to find the best in others,
including even in ourselves.

I will not be afraid.

There was no sense, after Mary's story,
that it was Emily's turn,
but nonetheless we sort of turned toward her.
She seemed ready to speak.

Emily said that giving up fear and daring to dream of meeting
your heart's longing

wasn't something you did once and then you're all set,
but instead, a constant, day-by-day thing.

Especially, she said, when the fear that had tried to shrivel you
up was an old one.

Especially in the silent moments by yourself,
when it could be hard to enjoy the company you keep.

For Emily, it wasn't about a fear of loss, or fear of difference,
but about religion.

About a fear of hell.

Tyler stifled a kind of laugh - Tyler was raised in a very secular family,

and he said, "Really? Hell? The lake of fire and all that?"

Emily said yes, that.

And the way she said it, I guess,

Tyler and the rest of realized this wasn't trivial.

This was real.

In Emily's family, hell was a real thing, a place you went if you were bad,

or even just less than perfect.

Not that they talked about it a lot - it was mostly whispers -

like "He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named,"

hell had more power for its silence.

She stopped going to that church the day she left for college, but the childhood image, the fear, it stays with you.

You can decide not believe in hell, and still be captured by the fear of it.

And it stops you, she said, at least it stopped her, so often,

from daring to dream of being herself,

from answering the invitation to live her best life,

from being true to her heart and soul.

What if it was a sin?

What if she'd go to hell?

Then her conscious mind would say,

there's no such place.

But her unconscious mind was so strong.

"How did you get over it?," asked Tyler, genuinely curious.

"I haven't," said Emily.

"But it doesn't have quite the same grip on me anymore.

I did a lot of reading."

She now goes to a church, sometimes, where they say there is no hell -
so she knows that believing in hell isn't required to be religious.
But what's helped most is laughing about it.
Making fun.
She loves cartoons about hell.
The New Yorker does great ones.
Such as, "It's hell, but at least it's a white collar hell."
But the best are the far side.
"Oh Man! The Coffee's cold. They thought of everything!"

There are religious ideas that are about fear, Emily understands.
Not just hell.
Lots of ideas - designed to control people,
designed to separate us,
used to make violence and empire and pain.
But these, she says, are not the only religious ideas that matter.
It was a religious idea she heard that helped her let go of hell:
namely, that God is love and love is for everyone.
Forgiveness and blessing, joy and hope can be religious ideas.
She laughs, and she lives, and it's always work,
but she is trying to dare to dream of meeting her heart's longing.

Those of us around the table haven't turned to Tyler,
though he and I are the ones who haven't spoken yet,
that evening in the backyard.
Tyler's topic of fear and invitation and hope is no surprise to us.
Tyler's dated five or six people in the last few years,
since his 10-year relationship ended in betrayal and pain.

He still hasn't found what's he's looking for.
The things to be afraid of in relationships are many,
he reminds us:
afraid of being rejected;
afraid of becoming dependent;
afraid of being depended upon;
afraid of falling for someone and having them not fall for you;
afraid of falling in love and then falling out again;
afraid of hurting someone else's feelings;
afraid of choosing the Mr. good-enough and missing out on Mr.
just wonderful.
So many fears!
And the fear of being alone.
Of having to like the company you keep when you are by
yourself.

Tyler is reassured, he tells us, by Emily's comment that you
don't ever totally get over it.
It's life-long work.
And it helps to laugh.
It helps a lot.
He thinks, too, that maybe he should make a vow, like Mary
did.
I will not be afraid of love.
I will not be afraid of falling in love, of falling out of love;
I will not be afraid of loving myself.
He thought about Sam's story -
to step away from the pattern,
to breathe,
to invest his energy in things that bring him joy and purpose
and make the world a better place,
to not try so hard,
and answer the invitation to just be alive.

To cry when you need to and then get up in the morning and do what needs to be done.

To say yes to life,
to a life of meaning rather than a life of regret,
respect instead of fame,
and joy instead of fear.
Day by day.

No magic, no snap-your-fingers. Just life, honest and true.

Those were the stories we heard that night.

I told them some of mine, too -
but I'll save that for another day.
Or maybe you already know them,
for, as the poet says,
it doesn't interest me if the story you are telling me is true.
I want to know if you can be faithless and therefore trustworthy.

Stories invite stories.

What's keeping you from daring to dream of meeting your heart's longing?

What fear is under your anger?

Your prejudice?

Your self-denial?

Your pain?

What would it mean to laugh it away, or leave it behind, or step away and become more fully yourself?

What would it mean to come with praise and thanks for fearful hours that pass,

to sing our thanks and praise for all that is our life?

What would it mean for you to answer the invitation?

Who might you be if you met your heart's longing?

What is your story?

Not a finished one, but one that goes on, day by day,
as you learn and practice to live your true and best life,
as you say yes to life and truth and love?

What's your story?

I invite you today and every day to live and love your story,
to love yourself and each other,
to laugh at and lay aside your fears,
to vow to be not afraid,
to use your life to build the common good.

I invite you to stand in the center and not shrink back.

I invite you to dance and dream and risk.

I invite you, now, to sing.