

Wisdom, Death, and the Transcendental: Beauty, Nature, the Arts, and Love

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In our latter years—and who knows how many more any of us have on this good earth—thoughts of death and the meaning of life come more naturally to us. We instinctively believe, or at least want to believe, that there's more to life than our humdrum existence.

But what is that more?

In the mid-1870s the fear of death began increasingly haunting Leo Tolstoy, the famous Russian author of *War and Peace*. The fear was part of a prolonged spiritual crisis which he later described in [My Confession](#). In 1875, at a mere age 47, he [wrote](#) to a friend that he felt old age had begun for him. He defined this as an “inner spiritual condition in which nothing from the outer world has any interest, in which there are no desires and one sees nothing but death ahead of one.” Even though at this stage he could not envision anything after death but nothingness, he was strongly tempted to end his own life. His fear of death and his mental anguish seemed greater evils than death itself.

Looking at Tolstoy just from the outside, this anguish seems strange indeed. Here he was the owner of a large, magnificent [estate](#), resplendent with the glories of nature. *Anna Karenina*, which he was then writing and sharing with readers in a monthly journal, was a success, and he had achieved all the fame one could reasonably desire. Despite the deaths of a few of his children—not an uncommon phenomenon in large nineteenth-century Russian families—he and his wife Sonia still had three boys and two girls, all healthy. Sonia, who was sixteen years younger than Tolstoy, was a capable and devoted wife and mother, and he himself was in good physical condition.

But, he thought, what good was any of this when one realized that sooner or later the “dragon of death” awaited everyone. “So what” was the response that came from deep within him whenever he thought of his accomplishments, “why?” or “for what reason?” whenever he contemplated a new activity. Life had become meaningless for him.

He looked to past wise men like Solomon, but found no comfort:

“All that is in the world—folly and wisdom and riches and poverty and mirth and grief—is vanity and emptiness. Man dies and nothing is left of him. And that is stupid,” says Solomon. . . .

“Therefore eat thy bread with joy and drink thy wine with a merry heart. . . . Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity. . . for this is thy portion in life and in thy labours which thou takest under the sun. . . . Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might, for there is not work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.”

If such thoughts can come to someone like Tolstoy with all his talents, wealth, health, fame, and devoted family, what hope is there for us less fortunate humans?

Transcendence and the Transcendentalists

For many people the answer to death is religion and the belief in some kind of afterlife. (Religion also eventually provided Tolstoy a way out of his darkness and despair. But the religious beliefs he finally settled on were a unique blend all his own, even though he insisted that they were based on Christ's teachings and rejected traditional Christian teachings about life after death.) But for nonbelievers generally, including agnostics and atheists, what sort of solace is there?

Perhaps some sort of transcendence is the answer. But what is transcendence? The [Oxford Dictionaries](#) defines it as "existence or experience beyond the normal or physical level." Many writers on wisdom have commented on it. In his [The Farther Reaches of Human Nature](#) (1971), psychologist Abraham H. Maslow devotes a chapter to the "Various Meanings of Transcendence," and lists 35 of them. Copthorne Macdonald, founder of The Wisdom Page, [viewed](#) it as akin to

the unity that the perennial philosophy would have us see, the unity dealt with in the mystical traditions of both East and West, the unity of transcendence, of Maslow's "Farther Reaches." It is an intuition-based type of holistic seeing. Coming to see this unity requires an intuitive shift of vantage point — and ultimately, of identification. The world observed by these people is the same world that everyone else sees; nothing external has changed. But they suddenly see that reality in a new context; they see in the data of life a meaning that wasn't evident before.

MacDonald's mention of the perennial philosophy and mystical traditions requires further elaboration. Aldous Huxley once wrote a [book](#) about the first term and identified it as "the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds." Mysticism, however, can exist outside of traditional religious bounds, as it does in poets and writers who are sometimes labeled "nature mystics."

Educator [Howard McClusky](#) also commented on Maslow's insights and believed that transcendence is one of the basic needs of older people and that they require it to rise above declining physical powers and decreasing life expectancy. More recently, Tom Lombardo has emphasized its importance in "[A Virtue Theory of Wisdom](#)," where he writes of the need to aspire toward self-transcendence, to dedicate ourselves "to a higher good or more encompassing reality beyond the self." In an earlier work, he [refers](#) to Martin Seligman's book *Authentic Happiness*, which "surveyed key values not just across cultures but across human history." And of the six values Seligman stressed, one was transcendence. Lombardo sums up the author's thinking about it.

Our lives should serve a transcendent reality (God, country, spouse, family, community, etc.) rather than just being self-serving. "Transcendence", in fact, is one of the primary character virtues in Seligman's list. In many ways, transcendence contradicts our modern emphasis on the ego, self-gratification, and

subjectivism – transcendence means realizing that there is something beyond our private reality that needs to become our center of gravity and our standard of truth and value.

As Seligman and Lombardo realize, transcendence involves an appreciation of beauty and, as one scholar [notes](#), the expression of faith, hope, and love.

In the United States the most famous advocates of transcendence were the Transcendentalists, most notably Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (IEP) succinctly [sums up](#) their viewpoint.

American transcendentalism is essentially a kind of practice by which the world of facts and the categories of common sense are temporarily exchanged for the world of ideas and the categories of imagination. The point of this exchange is to make life better by lifting us above the conflicts and struggles that weigh on our souls. As these chains fall away, our souls rise to heightened experiences of freedom and union with the good. . . .

Looking at the world through common sense categories, such as time, space, and causation, yields hard and fast limits that can hurt us. Causation seems to make certain outcomes unavoidable whether we like them or not. Space separates us from the ones we love and the places we would rather be. Not to be outdone, time brings all good things to an end and converts the living into the dead. The categories of imagination free us from these detestable limits. We can imagine a world in which physical space is no more than an idea, enabling us to move from place to place at the speed of our thoughts [and] . . . generate only what is true, beautiful, and good. Not even time presents a problem for imagination, since we can readily view all things from the standpoint of eternity.

The same source notes, “If there is a single practice with which American transcendentalism can be identified, it is contemplation of beauty. Emerson responded to Plato’s theory that beauty, truth, and goodness are one by saying that even so beauty is the best of the three.”

Although Transcendentalism was a mid-nineteenth-century movement, its central intuition of our unity with nature and a larger world of goodness, truth, and beauty has been expressed by many writers, especially poets, both before and after that era.

A Personal Approach to Transcendence

Although transcendence speaks to our union with other existences, it is experienced by unique individuals. How any of us, for example, experiences the beauty of life can vary greatly. I once had a colleague who, after a horrible accident, spent the last decade or so of his life as a quadriplegic. He had always loved classical music more intensely than anyone else I had ever known. After his accident, it achieved even more meaning for him, time and again the music of Bach, Mozart, and others lifted him to heights far above his injured body.

Others have found meditation, both within and outside religious traditions, to be an important path for achieving transcendence. Still others have experienced it through science, as Albert Einstein [did](#).

The most beautiful and deepest experience a man can have is the sense of the mysterious. It is the underlying principle of religion as well as all serious endeavour in art and science. He who never had this

experience seems to me, if not dead, then at least blind. To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is a something that our mind cannot grasp and whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly and as a feeble reflection, this is religiousness.

For me, however, transcendence, has come primarily from three sources of beauty: nature, the arts, and love. As a child and youth, I was not very attuned to beauty, but I do remember some cool mornings just quietly basking in the warmth of the sun. And many years later, after reading D. H. Lawrence's poem "[Piano](#)," with its lines "To the old Sunday evenings at home, with winter outside / And hymns in the cosy parlour, the tinkling piano our guide," I recalled transcendent times listening to my mother play various songs like "Danny Boy."

Nature

Although parts of nature are always accessible to us—the sun, the moon, stars, etc.—many of us ignore their wonders. It was only after taking a poetry class in college that I began to pay more attention to nature and its many beauties. Our text was *Sound and Sense* (1956 ed.), and I am amazed to see that more than a half century and numerous editions later, it is [still being published](#). As I skim through my old text, I see some of the poems that helped awaken more appreciation of nature: Shakespeare's "[Spring](#)," Wordsworth's "[The World Is Too Much With Us](#)," Keats' "[To Autumn](#)," Tennyson's "[The Eagle](#)," Housman's "[Loveliest of Trees](#)," Arnold's "[Dover Beach](#)," Hopkins' "[God's Grandeur](#)," and "[Pied Beauty](#)," Masfield's "[Sea Fever](#)," Sandburg's "[The Harbor](#)," and Frost's "[Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening](#)." (All of these poems and thousands more are available online at the [Poetry Foundation's site](#), and some of them also can be also be accessed on its [Poetry Mobile App for iPhone and Android](#), which is searchable by poet and other categories.)

Before taking my poetry class, I had been like those Wordsworth described in his above-mentioned poem:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not.

After the class, I became more attuned to nature and appreciating more of its many beauties. After Emerson met the English Romantic poets Coleridge and Wordsworth on a trip to Europe in 1832-1833, he also seems to have appreciated the wonders of nature more. In his first published work [Nature](#) (1836), he wrote: "The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are inaccessible; but all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence. . . . Nature never became a toy to a wise spirit. The flowers, the animals, the mountains, reflected the wisdom of his best hour, as much as they had delighted the

simplicity of his childhood. When we speak of nature in this manner, we have a distinct but most poetical sense in the mind.” During this same period he wrote, “Every natural form to the smallest, a leaf, a sunbeam, a moment of time, a drop, is related to the whole, and partakes of the beauty of the whole.” (See [here](#) for the source of the quote and more on Emerson.)

In the many years since my poetry class, I have experienced some of my most transcendent moments while basking in nature’s beauties. Observing sunrises and sunsets over oceans or lakes have sometimes filled me with feelings of peace and contentment, as my ego with all its worldly cares temporarily vanishes amidst a feeling that I am simply a blessed part of nature’s great beauty. Looking at stars and the moon has sometimes elicited a similar feeling. For example, one night on a ship on Russia’s Lake Baikal, the enormous number of stars shining everywhere filled me with a unique transcendent moment. [Hiking at Yosemite](#) or other National Parks, or along the [Appalachian Trail](#) provided other such instances.

Reading more about and by National-Parks-advocate [John Muir](#), who admired the works of Emerson, Thoreau, Robert Burns, and Wordsworth, has also heightened my appreciation of the transcendent beauty offered by nature. And the poets he admired and many others have written about the beauty of all aspects of nature. Blake saw beauty in the lamb and the tiger; Keats in the nightingale, grasshopper, and cricket; Hardy in the thrush; Tennyson in the eagle, Yeats in swans, and Burns even in the mouse and the louse, and [Kinnel in the sow](#). The poets also see it in the seasons, as Keats did in [“To Autumn,”](#) or in weather as Bridges did in [“London Snow”](#) or Pasternak in [“After the Storm.”](#) (Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago* and the poems in it proclaim a consistent emphasis on beauty.) Various poets, like Pushkin in [“To the Sea,”](#) see beauty in water, mountains, valleys, trees, and other manifestations of nature.

But humans are also part of nature, and beauty is found in us and in our own creations: our cities, our skyscrapers, our bridges, and most of all in our arts, whether literature, music, painting, sculpture, architecture, film or some other art. Poems on the beauty of various women are too numerous to count, and W. B. Yeats expresses the mesmerizing attraction that such beauty can entice when during World War I he wrote in his poem [“Politics”](#):

How can I, that girl standing there,
My attention fix
On Roman or on Russian
Or on Spanish politics?

Poets can see beauty in a [crowd at a baseball game](#), as did William Carlos Williams, or in common working people, as did Sandburg in a poem like [“The People, Yes.”](#) In Pushkin’s [The Bronze Horseman](#), he rhapsodies over St. Petersburg, and Sandburg does so regarding his own city in [“Chicago.”](#) In [“To Brooklyn Bridge”](#) Hart Crane conveys the beauty he sees in one of his favorite New York sights.

Emerson is not alone in believing that goodness, truth, and beauty are linked—just “different faces of the same All.” Men and women certainly display beauty when they feed the hungry,

shelter the homeless, or aid the sick and injured. Take for example the case of Dorothy Day. In 1933 she began establishing Hospitality Houses, where needy persons received food, clothing, shelter, and other help. [A biographer](#) once [wrote](#) about her: “She was profoundly attentive to beauty and managed to find it in places where it was often overlooked — in nature, in a piece of bread, in the smell of garlic drifting out a tenement window, in flowers blooming in a slum neighborhood, in the battered faces of people who had been thrown away by society.” But perhaps the greatest beauty was in her everyday acts of kindness to those she helped. (See [here](#) for more on Day).

The poet Wordsworth, who depicted so much beauty in nature, also saw it in humans. In his [“Tintern Abbey,”](#) he wrote of “that best portion of a good man’s life, / His little, nameless, unremembered, acts / Of kindness and of love.”

Philosopher Michael Novak in his [The Joy of Sports](#) sees great beauty in the sports we humans play: “God is a sports fan. Certainly He is, if He likes to see humans straining to their utmost to be the best He made them, making moments of imperishable beauty. Sports have to be among His glories. I do not pretend to speak for Him but, looking everywhere for signs, I am often reminded of Him, not least by deeds of excellence and beauty.” (For more on “Beauty in Nature,” see the essay with that title by the Russian poet and philosopher Vladimir Soloviev in [The Heart of Reality: Essays on Beauty, Love, and Ethics by V. S. Soloviev.](#))

The Arts

Numerous philosophers, including Soloviev and Arthur Schopenhauer, have realized the centrality of the arts for appreciating beauty and achieving transcendent moments. The arts treated here will be music, the visual arts, and literature, especially poetry.

Music

Among the arts, [according to Schopenhauer](#), music occupies an important transcendent place. Gabriel Marcel was another philosopher who [emphasized](#) the link between music and transcendence. The psychologist Maslow also [believed](#) that music was one of the most common “triggers” of achieving transcendence through peak experiences, which he defined as “a generalization for the best moments of the human being, for the happiest moments of life, for experiences of ecstasy, rapture, bliss, of the greatest joy.”

Also among the many lovers of music who realized its transcendent capabilities were helper-of-the-poor Dorothy Day (see [here](#) for her love of music) and Carl Sandburg. He was not only a poet, fiction writer, and Lincoln biographer, but also a folk song collector and singer. One of his early poems states:

A MAN saw the whole world as a grinning skull and cross-bones. The rose flesh of life shriveled from all faces. Nothing counts. Everything is a fake. Dust to dust and ashes to ashes and then an old darkness and a useless silence. So he saw it all. Then he went to a Mischa Elman [a famed Russian violinist who made his U.S. debut in 1908] concert. Two hours waves of sound beat on his eardrums. Music washed something or

other inside him. Music broke down and rebuilt something or other in his head and heart. He joined in five encores for the young Russian Jew with the fiddle. When he got outside his heels hit the sidewalk a new way. He was the same man in the same world as before. Only there was a singing fire and a climb of roses everlastingly over the world he looked on.

Near the end of his novel *Remembrance Rock*, Sandburg has Justice Windom's grandson read something his wise grandfather had written: "You may become the witnesses of the finest and brightest era known to mankind. You shall have music, the nations over the globe shall have music, music instead of murder. It is possible. That is my hope and prayer—for you and for the nations." At the end of his life, when poor health reduced the great vitality that had always characterized him, he often listened to classical music on his record player, especially Chopin. To Sandburg, music was like poetry in its ability to help men and women transcend their humdrum existence. (See [here](#) for citations from Sandburg.)

In 1942, he wrote a public letter to Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich commenting on the uplift given to so many people around the world by his Seventh [Leningrad] Symphony. When the symphony was finally performed in Leningrad's Philharmonic Hall in August 1942, then in the midst of a 900-day Nazi siege that would take about a million Leningrad lives, the reaction was overwhelming. This was true both in the concert hall among soldiers and civilians, some emaciated from lack of food, and among radio listeners apartments and trenches. When the symphony was over people inside the hall stood and cried, and the conductor believed that at that moment Leningraders knew they would triumph "over the soulless Nazi war machine."

In a more humble venue, a Leningrad woman in a bomb-shelter that echoed with German bombs exploding outside recalled how an old man got out his violin and played a beautiful melody. She thought that the terror people had been feeling lost its grip, replaced by an "extraordinary sense of belonging." (See [here](#) for source of Leningrad quotes.)

As to what type of music and what particular passages or songs create transcendental experiences for us, we all have our individual favorites. For me they are usually classical passages as from [Mozart](#), [Tchaikovsky](#), or [Shostakovich](#). But certain ballads, like "[The Fields of Athenry](#)" also move me deeply. Sandburg gathered American folk songs, including ballads, in his *The American Songbag* (1927) and *The New American Songbag* (1950), and at times, poorly imitating Sandburg, I find that picking up my guitar and playing and singing simple folk songs transports me away from mundane concerns.

The Visual Arts

In the Dresden Art Gallery the Russian writer Dostoevsky loved several paintings. In his novel [A Raw Youth](#) his character Versilov describes one of them as

a picture by Claude Lorraine, called in the catalogue "[Acis and Galatea](#)," but I used to call it "The Golden Age." . . . I dreamed of this picture, but not as a picture, but, as it were, a reality. . . . it was just as in the picture, a corner of the Grecian Archipelago, and time seemed to have gone back three thousand years; blue smiling waves, isles and rocks, a flowery shore, a view like fairyland in the distance, a setting sun that

seemed calling to me It seemed a memory of the cradle of Europe, and that thought seemed to fill my soul, too, with a love as of kinship. Here was the earthly paradise of man: the gods came down from the skies, and were of one kin with men. . . . Oh, here lived a splendid race! they rose up and lay down to sleep happy and innocent; the woods and meadows were filled with their songs and merry voices. Their wealth of untouched strength was spent on simple-hearted joy and love. The sun bathed them in warmth and light, rejoicing in her splendid children The feeling of all this I lived through, as it were, in that dream; rocks and sea, and the slanting rays of the setting sun—all this I seemed still to see when I woke up and opened my eyes, literally wet with tears. I remembered that I was glad, a sensation of happiness I had never known before thrilled my heart till it ached; it was the love of all humanity.

Other writers, especially poets, have also described transcendent experiences they have had looking at paintings. William Carlos Williams, for example, wrote poems about some of Pieter Brueghel's paintings (see [here](#) for links to the paintings and poems), realizing the timeless and transcendent quality of many of the sixteenth-century Flemish painter's works. In looking at paintings like "Peasant Wedding," "Haymaking," or "The Wedding Dance in the Open Air," we can, at least momentarily, transcend our limited egos and experience the commonality of human existence. As Williams wrote in "Children's Games":

Brueghel saw it all
and with his grim

humor faithfully
recorded
it.

Although I have visited some of the great art museums of the world (e.g., the Vatican Museums, the [Louvre](#) in Paris, and the [Hermitage](#) in St. Petersburg), I perhaps never appreciated art as much as I did during an eight-day stay at a rehab facility (Heartland of Boca Raton), after breaking my hip in 2005. Lining the halls of the facility were more than one hundred paintings, prints, and artistic and historical reproductions. I cannot remember the names of any of the works but do remember that frequently at night, unable to sleep well, I would grab my walker and amble down the halls looking with great pleasure at the men, women, children, seacoasts, streams, and mountains displayed on the walls.

It is difficult to say exactly why on that occasion art gave me so much pleasure. But perhaps when our bodies are ailing, when they remind us of their frailty and that of all human existence, our spirits require a reminder of our oneness with nature and with other human beings. My own experiences at the Boca Raton rehab center helped me realize why music and art therapies have become important means of helping ailing people, including [those with Alzheimer's](#). Several years ago *The New York Times* printed an article entitled "[Art Intended to Make the End of Life Beautiful.](#)" It was about the artist Tobi Kahn and his mother Ellen, age 75. She was in a hospital, dying of pancreatic cancer. To comfort her, he brought in some of his nature paintings and hung them in her room. He later said, "Why shouldn't the end of your life be beautiful? People say your wedding should be beautiful, your birth should be beautiful. Why not your death? You can't go trekking in the Himalayas, you can't eat a gourmet meal. But you can look at beautiful art." Mr. Kahn has also "created art for hospices, hospitals and memorial chapels, art ranging from a single canvas to an entire room for meditation." In addition, a national

organization commissioned him to be the chief artist providing works for a planned New York palliative care residence. The president of the organization realized the importance of art “when the body and mind are being naturally attacked through illness or aging or whatever.”

Besides painting, there are also other visual arts like sculpture. Pieces like Auguste Rodin’s [The Kiss](#) not only move us by their beauty, but, like his [The Thinker](#), can lead us to reflection. Viewing *The Kiss* reminds me of the beauty and transcendence that love can help us achieve (see below).

John Keats’ poem [“Ode on a Grecian Urn”](#) offers us his appreciation of the transcendent power of still another artifact—a marble urn on which an artist has depicted scenes that tell a story —“Sylvan historian, who canst thus express / A flowery tale.” With the poets help and our imagination, we see and hear trees, pipes, timbrels, a “bold lover” seeking a kiss, town folk in a pastoral setting going in procession to offer some sort of sacrifice.

What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?

Keats leads us to reflect on time and the timelessness of art:

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
For ever piping songs for ever new;
More happy love! more happy, happy love!
For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
For ever panting, and for ever young;

Near the end of the poem, Keats says to the urn:

When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man to whom thou say'st,
“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

In his [analysis](#) of the poem, literary critic Cleanth Brooks maintains that the urn, as Keats interprets it, offers “not only beauty but insight into essential truth.” The truth I

see in the poem is that even though we as individuals will die someday, the beauty the arts depict will live on, and we should rejoice at that.

Literature, Especially Poetry

Having already mentioned the transcendent truth and beauty offered to us by Keats and other poets, a little more still needs to be said about how poetry and literature as a whole can lift us above our mundane and ego-centered cares. Carl Sandburg thought that poetry was about creating beauty, and his leading biographer wrote that for him, “poetry was the supreme myth, which enables human beings to endure reality, to survive it, even to transcend it.” (See [here](#) for source of quote.)

One of my favorite poems is Wordsworth’s [“Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood.”](#) It begins,

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore;—
Turn wheresoe'er I may,
By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

This sums up perfectly my feeling that every day we are surrounded with beauty. *We just fail to see it.* For, as this English poet had said in [another poem](#) (see above),

Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—
Little we see in Nature that is ours. . . .

And nature’s beauty exists despite all our mismanagement of this planet, our pollution and desecration of it. As another British poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, wrote more than a century ago:

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things

Poetry can offer us not just the beauty of transcendental reflections, but, like music, also that of sound. I find especially appealing the sound of some Russian poetry, perhaps in part because of its foreignness, but also because of the genius of poets like Alexander Pushkin. The [sound](#) of the Russian words in his passage about St Petersburg (“Peter’s creation”) in his long poem [“The](#)

[Bronze Horseman](#)” is especially marvelous. So too, however, are the sounds in English poems like Coleridge’s [“Kubla Khan”](#) and Dylan Thomas’s [“Fern Hill.”](#)

Although transcendent passages seem to appear most often in poetry, they can also be found in prose. In Tolstoy’s [War and Peace](#), we come across an exchange of views between the two male heroes of the novel, Pierre Bezukhov and Prince Andrei (Andrew) Bolkonski. Pierre says:

You say you can't see a reign of goodness and truth on earth. Nor could I, and it cannot be seen if one looks on our life here as the end of everything. On earth, here on this earth . . . there is no truth, all is false and evil; but in the universe, in the whole universe there is a kingdom of truth, and we who are now the children of earth are—eternally—children of the whole universe. Don't I feel in my soul that I am part of this vast harmonious whole? Don't I feel that I form one link, one step, between the lower and higher beings, in this vast harmonious multitude of beings in whom the Deity—the Supreme Power if you prefer the term—is manifest? If I see, clearly see, that ladder leading from plant to man, why should I suppose it breaks off at me and does not go farther and farther? I feel that I cannot vanish, since nothing vanishes in this world, but that I shall always exist and always have existed. I feel that beyond me and above me there are spirits, and that in this world there is truth.

In a letter of 1895, Tolstoy’s younger agnostic friend, the writer Chekhov, stated he did not understand nor need Tolstoy’s sense of immortality: “My ‘I’—my individuality, my consciousness, will be fused with this mass—such immortality I don’t need.” (See [here](#) for source of quote.) And yet, the young dramatist and short-story writer could also appreciate the transcendental, as we see in this passage from [“The Lady with the Dog”](#) (1899).

At Oreanda [near Yalta] they sat on a seat not far from the church, looked down at the sea, and were silent. Yalta was hardly visible through the morning mist; white clouds stood motionless on the mountain-tops. The leaves did not stir on the trees, grasshoppers chirruped, and the monotonous hollow sound of the sea rising up from below, spoke of the peace, of the eternal sleep awaiting us. So it must have sounded when there was no Yalta, no Oreanda here; so it sounds now, and it will sound as indifferently and monotonously when we are all no more. And in this constancy, in this complete indifference to the life and death of each of us, there lies hid, perhaps, a pledge of our eternal salvation, of the unceasing movement of life upon earth, of unceasing progress towards perfection. Sitting beside a young woman who in the dawn seemed so lovely, soothed and spellbound in these magical surroundings—the sea, mountains, clouds, the open sky—Gurov thought how in reality everything is beautiful in this world when one reflects: everything except what we think or do ourselves when we forget our human dignity and the higher aims of our existence.

More recently in the short novel [Remembering](#), Wendell Berry (who is also a poet) has his central character, Andy Catlett, hear birds’ songs, experience the rising sun, and realize the oneness of being.

The light’s music resounds and shines in the air and over the countryside, drawing everything into the infinite, sensed but mysterious pattern of its harmony. From every tree and leaf, grass blade, stone, bird, and beast, it is answered and again answers. The creatures sing back their names. . . . They sing their being. The world sings. The sky sings back. It is one song, the song of the many members of one love, the whole song sung and to be sung, resounding, in each of its moments. And it is light.

Love

The last major source of transcendence for me has been love, and it is also a subject about which Wendell Berry has written insightfully. Two of his novels, [Jayber Crow](#) and [Hannah Coulter](#),

have much to say about the subject. Since I have written at more length on this topic [elsewhere](#), just a few paragraphs on Berry's thoughts on love's relationship with transcendence are needed here.

In the first novel, Jayber reflects that "Young lovers see a vision of the world redeemed by love. That is the truest thing they ever see, for without it life is death." He also thinks that

love, sooner or later, forces us out of time. It does not accept that limit. . . . Love is always a little more than strange here. It is not explainable or even justifiable. It is itself the justifier. We did not make it. If it did not happen to us, we could not imagine it. . . . It is in the world but it is not altogether of it. It is of eternity. . . . We must take love to the limit of time, because time cannot limit it. A life cannot limit it. Maybe to have it in your heart all your life in this world, even where it fails here, is to succeed. Maybe that is enough.

In the second novel, Hannah thinks that

love is a great room with a lot of doors, where we are invited to knock and come in. Though it contains all the world, the sun, moon, and stars, it is so small as to be also in our hearts. It is in the hearts of those who choose to come in. Some do not come in. Some may stay out forever. Some come in together and leave separately. Some come in and stay, until they die, and after.

Later on, she extends that thought.

My mind, I think, has started to become, it is close to being, the room of love, where the absent are present, the dead are alive, time is eternal, and all creatures prosperous. The room of love is love that holds us all, and it is not ours. It goes back before we were born. It goes all the way back. It is Heaven's. Or it is Heaven, and we are in it only by willingness.

In his non-fiction works Berry has also often written of love's transcendent powers. In "[Health is Membership](#)" he comments that "in the face of illness, the threat of death, and death itself, it [love] insists unabashedly on its own presence, understanding by its persistence through defeat that it is superior to whatever happens."

This idea is illustrated in Tolstoy's [The Death of Ivan Ilych](#), written after his *My Confession* and his spiritual crisis. On his deathbed Ivan finally gives himself over to love, to demonstrating it to his wife and son. Immediately after doing so his fear of death passed away. "Where is it? What death?" There was no fear because there was no death. In place of death there was light."

As Berry writes, "love is a great room with a lot of doors." There are many different kinds of love, including romantic, brotherly, and paternal love. But what all of them can do is remove us from being too egocentric. Psychologist and wisdom scholar Robert Sternberg [has written](#): "People are wise to the extent that they use their intelligence to seek a common good," and "smart and well-educated people" are often unwise because of four fallacies—all of which he relates to egotism.

Sooner or later, death will come to each of us. Through healthy living we can perhaps postpone it, but we cannot escape it. What we can do, however, is transcend it through love. In the

Christian New Testament, Paul [wrote](#) wise words about love: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.” And because of his belief in a Christian afterlife he also [added](#), “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”

Dorothy Day once wrote, “If we could only learn that the only important thing is love . . . to keep on loving, and showing that love, and expressing that love, over and over, whether we feel it or not, seventy times seven, to mothers-in-law, to husbands, to children—and to be oblivious of insult, or hurt, or injury—not to see them, not to hear them. . . . not judge, not do anything, but love, love, love.”

Like the words of St. Paul and Berry, Day’s words reflect Christian beliefs in the existence and goodness of God. But this emphasis on love and its transcendent power need not be limited to Christians or other religious believers. As he revealed in a [Newsweek interview](#), Sam Harris, sometimes referred to as one of “the new atheists,” believes we can achieve transcendence partly by being “more loving, more generous, [and] less egocentric.” (See [here](#) for more by Harris on transcendence.)

Love cannot prevent us from dying. But the realization of its inevitability while billions of others survive should humble us. Looking at the [world’s birth and death meter](#) we see a few new births every second and more than one death every second, and there are already almost 7.3 billion people on this earth. Do any of us really matter as much as each one of us thinks we do individually? But although death awaits each of us, our acts of love can live on, can continue to reverberate among all those whom we have loved and even those we have never known. Tolstoy, Chekhov, Sandburg, Day are all dead, but their wise words and acts of love continue to influence many of us. And this is true not just regarding the influence of the famous, but also that of those little known: the kind and loving mothers and fathers, the good neighbors, the inspiring teachers, the compassionate healthcare workers.

If we can put our egos aside, we need not grieve so much at our own eventual deaths, but instead rejoice at all the beauty, goodness, and love that will continue to exist. And while we are still alive we can help through love insure that our earth survives for these wonders of life to flourish. In his essay [“Word and Flesh,”](#) Berry states that only love can save our planet, “only love can bring intelligence out of the institutions and organizations, where it aggrandizes itself, into the presence of the work that must be done.”

Seeking to love and transcend our bodily limitations, we can aspire to live as Stephen Spender suggests in his poem [“The Truly Great.”](#)

What is precious, is never to forget
The essential delight of the blood drawn from ageless springs
Breaking through rocks in worlds before our earth.

Never to deny its pleasure in the morning simple light
Nor its grave evening demand for love.
Never to allow gradually the traffic to smother
With noise and fog, the flowering of the spirit.

Spender stated that he continually thought of those who lived as he described, who were “truly great,” who loved and manifested a “flowering of the spirit.” They left, he said, “the vivid air signed with their honour.” If we too live in such a manner, we can help make the earth a better place, and the effects of our words and deeds can continue to reverberate long after our bodies are no more.