

John H. Bonner, III
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11th Sunday after Pentecost (15-B)

“Pablo Picasso Alzheimer’s Therapy”

Randy Kennedy writes in the New York Times (10-30-2005):

Sitting the other day in front of Picasso’s rapturous “Girl Before a Mirror” at the Museum of Modern Art, Rueben Rosen wore the dyspeptic look of a man with little love for modern art. But the reason he gave for disliking the painting was not one you might expect to hear from an 88 year-old former real estate broker. “It’s like he’s trying to tell a story using words that don’t exist,” Mr. Rosen said finally of Picasso, fixing the painter’s work with a critic’s stare. “He knows what he means, but we don’t.”

This chasm of understanding is one that Mr. Rosen himself stares into every day. He has midstage Alzheimer’s disease, as did the rest of the men and women who were sitting alongside him in a small semicircle at the museum, all of them staring up at the Picasso.

It was a Tuesday, and the museum was closed, but if it had been open other visitors could have easily mistaken the group for any guided tour. Mr. Rosen and his friends did not wear the anxious, confused looks they had worn when they first arrived at the museum. They did not quarrel in the way that those suffering from Alzheimer’s sometimes do. And when they talked

about the paintings, they did not repeat themselves or lose the thread of the discussion, as they often do at the long-term care-home where most of them live in Palisades, N.Y.

At one point, a member of the tour, Sheila Barnes, 82, a quick-witted former newspaper editor who suffers from acute short-term memory loss, was even uncharacteristically aware of the limitations of her memory. “If I’ve told this story before, then somebody just say, ‘Cool it, Sheila,’” she announced. Laughing.

She was a test subject, in a sense, in a growing effort to use art as a therapeutic tool for those in the grip of Alzheimer’s. Art therapy, both appreciating art and making it, has been used for decades as a non-medical way to help a wide variety of people --- abused children, prisoners and cancer and Alzheimer’s patients. But much of this work has taken place in nursing homes and hospitals. Now museums like the Modern and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, are trying to bring it into their galleries, using their collections as powerful ways to engage minds damaged by dementia.

It seems to be working, though no one knows exactly how. While extensive research has been conducted on the effects of music and performing arts on brain function... there has been comparatively little work done in the visual arts....

“Certainly it’s not just a visual experience---it’s an emotional one,” said Oliver Sacks, the neurologist and writer. “In an informal way I have often seen quite demented patients recognize and respond vividly to paintings and delight in painting at a time when they are scarcely responsive to words and disoriented and out of it. I think that recognition of visual art can be very deep.”

More than four million Americans suffer from Alzheimer’s disease, and the number is expected to rise as the nation’s overall population ages. With no cure on the horizon, caregivers are increasingly exploring art as a way to help manage the disease...

Irene Copeland Brention, 73, one of the visitors to the Modern on that Tuesday, suffers from a kind of Alzheimer’s that has made it very difficult for her to read and to find the right words to say.

That day at the museum, looking longingly at the figure lying in a field at the bottom of the Andrew Wyeth painting “Christian’s World,” she seemed to identify deeply with the thin young woman in the dress, her left hand reaching out toward the farmhouse. “You can’t see her face,” Ms. Brenton said, “but looking at her you get the feeling she’s happy.”

She was asked why. “Because you know she’s going to get to the house,” she said, adding: “I’d like to go into that house, too.”

“Home” is that place for which we all long. This, the Church of Jesus Christ is our ‘house.’ Our humanity drives us to this our ‘home’, but it is ever elusive. As the patients in the Art Gallery discover without knowing it, we come to a very deep place here. And if our view and vision of God is ever curious we must know that He feeds us along this path. He made us and he longs to hear from us and ‘save’ us from the world’s shallow view of life. Whatever you know or do not know about this Holy Meal we share each week understand God’s longing for us to be here. Why aren’t we more excited each week as we come to be fed by God? We see it as ‘obligation’ while He sees it as food for the journey, an exciting journey. This trip we make week by week is our greatest example of the godly life.

The Gospel of John is written at a time when the Eucharist was already established in the early Christian community. John does not describe the last supper as do the Synoptic Gospels. John’s work is interpretive not descriptive.

‘Bread’ and ‘Wine’ are as close as we get to ‘home’ here. It is to be fed by our Lord and know His perfect life in that moment. We confess, we pray and then we come and it does not stop there for then we are ‘sent’ to ‘proclaim’ Him to the world, for you see, the only thing the world knows of Jesus is what you and I tell it. Through this ‘bread’ and ‘wine’ the Divine

life of the Son of God is conveyed to us, the believers. In Proverbs this morning we are instructed: “Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.” The reward of our partaking is that somewhere deep within is a touching place with God.

As you leave this rail what is it that you think? I hope you leave here to ‘throw yourself’ into life as never before. Understanding ‘home’ just a little better.

“What’s so original about this man?” asked a visitor. “All he gives you is a hash of stories, proverbs, and sayings from other masters.”

A woman disciple smiled. She once had a cook, she said, who made the most wonderful hash in the world.

“How on earth do you make it, my dear? You must give me the recipe.”

The cook’s face glowed with pride.

She said, “Well, ma’am, I’ll tell yer: beef’s nothin’; pepper’s nothin’; onion’s nothin’; but when I throws myself into the hash --- that’s what makes it what it is.”

What is it that you see when you look at the great art of God’s meal for you? This meal is as difficult for us to understand as is the world to the

Alzheimer's patient and yet there are moments when we see it as the 'home' God intends we see it as. It is not the same every week but there are those moments when we 'get it.'

“Throw yourself” into the life , the human life that God has given you. Invite others to come 'home' with you and experience God's gift. Know that you are fed and loved here and your only response should be the utter joy that God has in knowing you are His. Amen.