

Contentment
By
Daniel E. White September 11, 2023

A woman Brother Cadfael had once loved when he was a soldier in the Crusades appears again in his life well after he has become a Benedictine monk. Clearly, she still loves him, though they have been apart for many years, and he likely loves her, too. But he has chosen the cloister and means to fulfill that commitment. The woman asks, “Cadfael, are you happy?” He pauses to consider and then responds, “I am content.”

I understood the distinction.

We were watching the old BBC series based on Ellis Peters’ series of novels about Cadfael, a 12th century monk in Shrewsbury who dispenses medications and solved murders. Judy has read the entire series of novels and has encouraged several people to borrow her box of the books. To find the series streaming on Britbox was like seeing an old friend after many years. Derek Jacobi, the perfect actor for Cadfael, delivered the key line. “I am content.”

I wondered. Why did I get the distinction so quickly and easily? I looked online for hints.

Alice Carney, writing in the newsletter for the Green River Writer’s Workshop in 2014, said, “I’m thinking about contentment today, as, finally, rain falls gently in Sacramento, washing the leaves of the Sycamores up and down my street, cleaning the air of the dust motes and grime that have dulled the sky for two months.”

“I woke up this morning and one of my first thoughts was, “I need a new camera. My eight-year-old Canon Rebel just doesn't make it anymore. Photos not sharp enough. Something off with the colors. And the composition, the originality, just not there. A new, hot camera would fix all that. Oh, and when I get a new camera, I'll need one of those big, long telephoto lenses like my friend has, a foot-long lens that can take a sharp photo of the iris of the eye of an eagle perched on a dead tree a mile away. I need. . .and I need, and I need.”

“Then I remembered the intention I set yesterday, to seek equilibrium, to sew myself a cloak of contentment with all that I have and what is around me. As the rain softened the hard soil outside, I looked through my photographs and forgot about technique or expensive equipment. I relived memories from the times these photographs were taken. I could feel the warm air, hear the whirr of birds' wings or the roar of a crowd, taste dust, touch the smoothness of a peony petal. I knew then that the purpose of my photographs is to feed my memory. That is all I need. I am content.”

After printing a poem by Mary Oliver, Carney concluded, “My wish for you is that you know contentment with the gifts you have.”

The poem Carney used is “Wild Geese.”

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine. Meanwhile the world goes on.

Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air, are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,

calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting – over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

Spending time most mornings on our patio with a cup of coffee enjoying the society of birds gathering to eat at our feeders, I am content. I have many reasons to be so, starting with a 61-year friendship and love affair with Judy, who seems content, too. A roof over my head, enough to eat, good health and a circle of friends; these characterize my life, the results of grace, luck, the guidance of others, being born into the family I was, etc.

Recognizing my good fortune inevitably makes me think about those who do not have the advantages evident in my life. How do I rationalize my contentment in light of the misfortune of others?

Mary Oliver offers one insight: there is an order in nature and each of us has a “place in the family of things” that we might not yet understand. “Meanwhile, the world goes on.”

Carney adds, “my wish for you is that you know contentment with the gifts you have.” Carney and Oliver came through for me with helpful hints.

People of a Certain Age, if you, too, are content, then you and I both are blessed. We are not absolved, however, of doing what we can to help others, to be kind and generous of spirit, to pass along, when opportunities present themselves, whatever deeds or words of comfort we can, whatever the sphere of our daily lives might be.

Cadfael’s contentment is in the service of others. Carney’s recognizes the gifts she has. Oliver sees that we are all part of something bigger than ourselves that we might not understand.

Ultimately, contentment is a state of mind. To be or not to be is a choice.

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