INTRODUCTION:

Freud’s essay was written in 1915. It was a time when transience had a special meaning for him. It was in the middle of WWI. He was 59 years old at the time and had postulated that he would die at the age of 61. In his mind his death was near. He does not write this essay in his usual analytical style. Instead, according to psychoanalyst Matthew von Unwerth (2005), this essay’s style differs from his other writings, and a more intuitive Freud emerges.

To help appreciate the depth of Freud’s text, I am taking an approach that is akin to a style of reading known as Lectio Divina, which means holy or sacred reading. It came into use within the Christian tradition in the Benedictine monasteries of the sixth century, when only few books were available. In a time set aside for prayer and contemplation, the monks had a text read to them from the Bible, for example, so that the text would be speaking to them. In turn, they savored the word or chewed the word to allow text to become part of them. It was the absorbing of the word that led to reflection and prayer.

Another way of looking at the text in a reflective manner comes from an article I picked up while waiting in a dentist’s office many years ago. It was in Reader’s Digest (July, 1973), entitled “Savour the Joys of Slow, Slow Reading” by an Australian named Sydney Piddington. Slow reading was a style that he developed while in a Japanese Prisoner of War camp in Singapore. The prisoners had to walk 17 miles to the camp where they were to be imprisoned for many years. Their commanding officer suggested that each man bring a book. Piddington put in his pack a book called The Importance of Living by Lin Yutang. This book, he says, kept him sane for the next three and one-half years. He says that before this time, he was an ordinary reader who sped from page to page to finish a book. Now he decided to become a miser with words. He says that by “lingering over each word or phrase, you will unearth surprising treasures.” Like the monks of old, Piddington savored the words and chewed over them in a way that allowed him to retain his sanity during his captivity. His style of reading allowed him to grasp more fully the meaning and sense of the book.

Another version of the same phenomenon, as D.T. Suzuki points out in his Lectures on Zen Buddhism (1963) can be seen in the different views taken by two poets as they reflect on a flower. They are Basho (a Japanese Zen poet of the 17th century) and Alfred Lord Tennyson (an English poet of the 19th century). Basho writes:

When I look carefully
I see the nazuna blooming
By the hedge!

Tennyson writes:

Flower in the crannied wall,
I pluck you out of the crannies;

Hold you here, root and all, in my hand,
Little flower – but if I could understand

What you are, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is.
We have, in the contrasting views of the two poets, different ways of thinking and observing. The Eastern poet writes about a single moment when he sees a flower peeking through the hedge. The sight elicits a moment of joy and admiration of nature’s humblest manifestations. In English and other Western languages, this is communicated through the use of the exclamation point. Nothing is touched or destroyed. Tennyson, on the other hand, plucks the flower from the wall, roots and all, thus killing it. He is satisfying a kind of analytical curiosity that exemplifies the scientific method. Tennyson takes a distance from the flower in his analytical stance, whereas Basho is immersed in the little plant. Basho is appreciating without disturbing. Tennyson is examining and disturbing.

It is in the style of Basho, Piddington and *Lectio Divina* that I read Freud’s essay. I am suggesting that this method of reading can sharpen the meaning and enjoyment of reading itself, and is another way of appreciating the text. I am simply giving voice to a different way to approach Freud’s text or other important readings for our lives.

Yet another way of appreciating the depth of Freud’s insight is to read it in association with some poetic texts. Seamus Heaney (2004), and Mary Schmich (2013) articulate my rationale. Seamus Heaney (1939-2013), the Irish poet writes, “I can’t think of a case where poems changed the world, but what they do is they change peoples’ understanding of what’s going on in the world” (*This Week* magazine 2004). Mary Schmich, a columnist for the *Chicago Tribune* elaborates on Heaney’s view in a column she wrote in response to the Boston bombings. She entitled her piece, “Plucking out lines of comfort in times of national mourning” (She says that “difficult moments prompt people to reach for poems or lines of poems the way you might pop a painkiller. A poetic turn of phrase can be a sedative or pick me up, a consolation or an inspiration.” She goes on to say: “A poet releases words into the world and sometimes as they travel, the words break apart and land, a few at a time, where they’re needed” (Chicago Tribune, April 19, 2013, p. 3). The pieces of poetry and literature that I have picked for this presentation will open up Freud’s text and give us a glimpse of a perennial human enterprise: facing transience and finding hope.

POETIC ASSOCIATIONS: 1

The two persons of whom Freud speaks in his essay are Rainer Maria Rilke (the “famous poet”) and Lou Andreas-Salome (the “taciturn friend”) who was a psychoanalyst, a famous novelist as well as a former lover of Rilke. “The poet,” says Freud “was disturbed by the thought that all this beauty was fated to extinction,” and that its transient nature “was its doom” (p. 358).

On reading these few lines of the opening paragraph, I was immediately transported back to my native Ireland and a poem learned in high school, called “The Wayfarer.” It was written by Padraic Pearse, a poet, a patriot, a lover of all things Irish, and a leader in the Irish rebellion of 1916, approximately the same time that Freud wrote his essay. Pearse was immersed in his own battle with the British forces in Ireland; Freud was in the middle of WWI. Pearse was executed for his part in the rebellion. I cannot present it here in full or dwell on it, but I draw your attention to opening lines: “the beauty of the world hath made me sad, This beauty that will pass,” and to the last two lines: “And I have gone upon my way Sorrowful” (1916)

Pearse, like Rilke, was touched more by sorrow than joy at the little events of everyday life. Here, he is speaking about the sorrows of the Irish and their continued failure to break their connection with England. He looks with a sad and mournful eye on all that would transition, and that he himself was about to die the next day.
Transience is a concern of the poet as well as all humans. It is a fact of life that Freud's companions on the walk found hard to accept. Shakespeare speaks of transience as a perpetual life reality. He demonstrates this in his sonnet 60, “Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore.” It is a description of our lives as we progress through them. Transience is with us from our very beginnings. It is our life and our passing. In the poem, he captures the life stages about which he speaks in As You Like It (Act 2, Scene 5). As he speaks about “changing place with that which goes before,” (Sonnet 60) he reminds us that the past, like the last wave, is irretrievable. Shakespeare speaks about the passing of time and the passing of our lives. There is a natural transience built into our existence. However, he longs for something permanent, something that will not be lost. He hopes it will be his verse that will achieve the permanence in the transience.

In Freud's essay there is also a reflection on time. He speaks about time in the sense that over time things return to normal. The human spirit is always set to rebuild. That is, mourning what was lost allows us to move forward again. To stay in the mourning is inviting what he calls melancholia. A British poet, Austin Dobson (1840-1921), speaks about time in another way that can be seen in these lines from the “Paradox of Time” (1886):

Time goes, you say? Ah no!
Alas, Time stays, we go!

Transience and Time are related closely to one another. Because of the transience of all things, the cry is to make use of time in the here and now. In a famous quote that is attributed to Carl Sandburg, paraphrasing his poem “Prairie” (1918), there is a telling comment about time

I tell you the past is a bucket of ashes,
so live not in your yesterdays, nor just for
tomorrow, but in the here and now
Keep moving and forget the post
Mortems; and remember, no one can
Get a jump on the future.

Robert Herrick (1591-1674) is another poet who is concerned about the passage of time, or as Dobson would say, our passage. We see this in two of his more well-known poems, “Gather ye Rosebuds While ye May,” and “To Daffodils” (1648). While the tone of “Gather ye rosebuds” is upbeat, he lets us know that time cannot be halted or retraced. Time is irretrievable. He draws parallels between the blooming rose and youth and between an individual's life span and the daily cycle of the rising and setting of the sun. Transience is the centerpiece and it is inevitable. His other poem, “To Daffodils” covers the same theme, but with a bit more somber tone: “We have short time to stay as you, We have as short a spring” In this poem he does not advise us to marry while we have the time. Instead, the poem is a kind of warning about our passage through time. It is again a reminder about the pre-eminence and, I suppose, the permanence of transience.

In his essay Freud finds the responses of the poet and the taciturn friend to be making sense when he views their reactions in the context of mourning. As he puts it: “some powerful emotional factor was at work which was disturbing their judgment.” The emotional factor, he says, was “a revolt in their minds against mourning.” He notes that “their enjoyment of beauty was interfered with by thoughts of transience.” However, Freud refutes their revolt against mourning when he says, “a flower that blossoms only for a single night does not seem to us on that account less lovely” (1915, p.358). He
sees the beauty in spite of the transience. We see an endorsement of Freud’s insight in John Keats poem “Endymion” (1818):

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing

Seeing beauty in the transience is only part of the story for Freud. At the same time, he underlines the importance of mourning that which was lost. A recovery from mourning is required so that the person can move on in life. As Freud puts it in his essay, “if the objects are destroyed or if they are lost to us, our capacity for love (our libido) is once more liberated” (p.359). In sonnet 30, Shakespeare tackles the question of mourning when he pens, “When to the Sessions of Sweet Silent Thought.” In the poem he pictures a life where mourning and grieving predominate. He grieves about grievances and feels the pain over again, as if he had not already suffered it. He cannot let them go. However, he sees the need to let these past grievances go lest life become intolerably weighed down. For him liberation and the return to sanity, come when he remembers his friend, “but if the while I think on thee, dear friend, all losses are restored and sorrows end.”

A refusal to mourn can be seen in Shakespeare’s King Lear. You likely remember the story. Lear decides to step aside as King of England and divide his kingdom between his three daughters, while maintaining some visiting rights with his daughters. As the story unfolds, he divides the kingdom in two because his daughter Cordelia does not give the narcissistic Lear the answer he wants and needs. In truth, we see as the play progresses, that Lear has not really given up his throne. He simply wants to continue his old life without any responsibility. His two empowered daughters do not allow Lear his fantasy. He is cast out to wander with his fool. Because he refused to mourn, he goes mad. In his case, a refusal to mourn leads to a total breakdown. As he is dying he comes to some sense of sanity and seeks to reconcile with Cordelia, but she has already been killed. This is a powerful experience of the irretrievable. We hear it in his last lines, as he kneels by Cordelia’s body: “O thou wilt come no more. Never, never, never.” What Lear did not grasp in giving up the kingdom was the reality that “mourning is the medicine of life” (von Unwerth), and we have to take it as both a bitter and sweet pill.

Recently, I saw a play by Katori Hall called The Mountaintop. It is a fantasy about Dr. Martin Luther King’s last night on earth. The play is set in the motel room in Memphis to which Dr. King returned after his early evening speech in support of the striking sanitation workers. We see him in his hotel room waiting for Ralph Abernathy to return with a pack of cigarettes. He ordered coffee that is brought to him by the hotel maid who, in this play, is an angel in disguise. She stays to talk and offer him cigarettes. As the night wears on, she reveals that she is an angel with a message from God for Dr. King. The message is that he is going to die tomorrow. In his speech to the sanitation workers that evening, Dr. King had returned to his “I have a dream” themes. “I’ve been to the mountaintop…and I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land.” The playwright presents him as struggling with the issue of transience. He tells the angel to get back in touch with God and to tell Him (she corrects Dr. King by saying “Her”) to change Her mind, and to give him more time because there is so much more work to be done, and he is the one who can do it. The author presents the private Dr. King as a man with the same strengths and flaws as any other human being. Dr. King did not
have much time to mourn, but Hall presents him as a man who finally came to terms with his destiny. His followers had to mourn so that they could advance what he had begun. We hear again the theme of Dobson’s “The Paradox of Time” (1886).

- Time goes, you say? Ah no!
- Alas. Time stays, we go;

I was also reminded of a few lines called “First Fig” (1920) by Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950):

- My candle burns at both ends;
- It will not last the night;
- But ah, my foes and oh, my friends—
- It gives a lovely light (p.90)

The acceptance of transience is a sign of resilience. Going through the mourning that comes with transience allows us to pick ourselves up again. The human spirit is resilient as we recover from wars, tsunamis, fires, floods, and a multitude of personal setbacks. In seeing the inevitability of transience we realize that adversity is never the end of the story. Mourning passes, hope returns. Mary Schmich, the Chicago Tribune columnist, gives words to this reality as she quotes a poem by the Polish Nobel Laureate, Wislawa Szymborska, entitled, “The End and the Beginning” (2013):

- After every war
- Someone has to clean up
- Things won’t
- Straighten themselves up, after all.
- Someone has to push the rubble
to the side of the road,
so the corpse-filled wagons
can pass (p.3).

This speaks to the way that people get back to business after violence rips apart their ordinary world, about how the passage of time transforms memories (we mourn) and restores hope. In his essay Freud speaks to the hope that once the mourning is over after WWI, that the people will rebuild again, “and perhaps on firmer ground and more lastingly than before” (1915, p.361).

In the Afterword to his Memoir, Dropped Names,(2012), the actor Frank Langella suggests that transience is really the permanence:

- And the wilderness in which I wandered as a young boy, believing myself forever lost, never to reach a destination, I have now come to feel is precisely the place to be.
- There is no lasting comfort, it seems to me, in the safe landing. Better to stay in flight, take the next bus, relinquish control, trust in happenstance, and embrace impermanence (p.356).

As the moments for my writing and your reading of this paper have passed irretrievably, I conclude with a quote from Tennyson’s (1835) poem “Morte D’Arthur:

- The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
- And God fulfills Himself in many ways
- Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.
References:


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SOME POETIC ASSOCIATIONS

When I look carefully
I see the nazuna blooming
By the hedge!

Basho

The beauty of the world hath made me sad,
This beauty that will pass;
Sometimes my heart hath shaken with great joy
To see a leaping squirrel in a tree,
Or a red lady-bird upon a stalk,
Or little rabbits in a field at evening,
Lit by a slanting sun,
Or some green hill where shadows drifted by
Some quiet hill where mountainy man hath sown
And soon would reap; near to the gate of Heaven;
Or children with bare feet upon the sands
Of some ebbed sea, or playing on the streets
Of little towns in Connacht,
Things young and happy.
And then my heart hath told me:
These will pass,
Will pass and change, will die and be no more,
Things bright and green, things young and happy;
And I have gone upon my way
Sorrowful.

Padraic Pearse

Sonnet 60
Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end,
Each changing place with that which goes before
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.
Nativity, one in the main of light,
Crawls to maturity, wherewith, being crowned,
And Time that gave, doth now his gift confound.
Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth,
And delves the parallels in beauty's brow,
Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth,
And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow;
And yet, to times, in hope my verse shall stand,
Praising thy worth despite his cruel hand.

William Shakespeare

The Paradox of Time
Time goes, you say? Ah, no!
Alas, Time stays, we go;
Or else, were this not so,
What need to chain the hours,
"I tell you the past is a bucket of ashes, so live not in your yesterdays,
not just for tomorrow, but in the here and now. Keep moving and forget the
For Youth were always ours? post mortems; and remember, no one
Time goes, you say?—ah, no! can get the jump on the future."
....Alas, Time stays, -we go!

Henry Austin Dobson

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To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time To Daffodils
Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, Fair daffodils, we weep to see
Old Time is still a-flying: You hate away so soon;
And this same flower that smiles to-day As yet the early-rising sun
To-morrow will be dying. As not attain’d his noon.

The glorious lamp of heaven, the sun, Stay, Stay
The higher he’s a-getting, Until the hasting day has run
The sooner will his race be run, But to the evensong;
And nearer he’s to setting And, having pray’d together, we

That age is best which is the first, Will go with you along.
When youth and blood are warmer; We have short time to stay, as you,
But being spent, the worse, and worst We have as short a spring;
Times still succeed the former. As quick a growth to meet decay,

Then be not coy, but use your time, As you, or anything.
And while ye may go marry: We die
For having lost but once your prime, As your hours do, and dry
You may for ever tarry. Away

Endymion We have short time to stay, as you,
A thing of beauty is a joy for ever: We have as short a spring;
Its loveliness increases; it will never As quick a growth to meet decay,
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep As you, or anything.
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep We die
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing. As your hours do, and dry

Robert Herrick Away

Sonnet 30 Like to the summer’s rain
When to the sessions of sweet silent thought Or as the pearls of morning/

I summon up remembrance of things past, We have short time to stay, as you,
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought, We have as short a spring;

And with old woes new wail by dear time’s waste: As quick a growth to meet decay,
...But if the while I think on thee, dear friend, As you, or anything.
custom

William Shakespeare Should corrupt the
All losses are restored and sorrows end. world..."

Morte D’Arthur

“The old order changeth, should corrupt the
yielding place to new world..."
And God fulfills
Himself
in many ways
Lest one good

Alfred Lord Tennyson