

“The Troll’s Magic Mirror” by Anna Gilcher

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The Troll’s Magic Mirror**

Lent 3, Year A

Exodus 17:1-7

Psalms 95

Romans 5:1-11

John 4:5-42

The Troll’s Magic Mirror

Do you know this story? A magic mirror created by an evil troll reflects the world by exaggerating all that is ugly and bad, and diminishing all that is good. It breaks one day into millions of pieces. Tiny slivers get into people’s hearts and eyes, turning their hearts into blocks of ice and causing them to see the world in twisted ways. One day a small boy named Kay gets one piece of this magic mirror stuck in his eye, and

another in his heart, and he starts mocking those around him and sees flaws in everything that he used to find beautiful. As time goes on, he isolates himself more and more from those he has loved and who love him, until finally he disappears in the snow one day, and people give him up for dead. His childhood friend Gerda decides, however, that he is not dead, and out of love for him sets out on a quest to find him and bring him home. Barefoot and barehanded in the cold, she finally finds him in the castle of the Snow Queen, almost completely frozen. He does not recognize her, or seem to care that she is there, until her tears melt the ice in his heart and the sliver of mirror that is stuck there; and then his own tears wash away the piece of glass that is in his eye. In their joy of reconnection, they laugh and cry, and the very ice seems to dance for joy along with them. The two children make their way home again, and when they get there, they find that they are grown up and that it is warm, beautiful summer again.

I read this story – Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale “The Snow Queen” – as a child (I imagine many of you did, too), and I found it quite disturbing. The idea that a shard of this mirror could get lodged in a loving heart, in an unsuspecting eye, and change the way a person felt and saw things without his even knowing it chilled me in my very bones. Was this somehow true? Could this be the way things really are?

I think it is telling that the *deformations* wrought by the mirror are not *fabrications*. The faults that the mirror exaggerates really do exist. It is just that, in the magic-mirror perspective of the world, any ugliness appears even uglier than it really is, and anything beautiful becomes so small, the story tells us, as to practically disappear.

When I try to stay “informed,” by reading the newspaper, this is often the view I get of the world. The beauty that I experience each day in prayer, in connection with other people and in worship, seems suddenly insignificant and “what’s happening in the world” – the crises, the killings, the injustices, the horrors – seem to be the true story.

I also know of this a movement within my own heart. I listen to myself talking about things that matter to me deeply and I judge them foolish and childish. A difficult period in a friendship becomes the thing that colors the whole history of that relationship: “So *this* is the way it’s always really been!” My heart aches with the splinter of glass that is in it, but I just figure that is the price of seeing things as they really are.

In the Exodus passage appointed for today, the people of Israel have come to a place where there is no water to drink, and they are thirsty. “*Therefore,*” we read, “the people found fault with Moses... They murmured against him and said, ‘why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?’” Suddenly, the lack of water becomes the whole story; the movement from slavery to freedom is insignificant; the parting of the Red Sea has been forgotten, and the manna that was provided for them is unimportant. “Why did you bring us out of Egypt *to kill us and our children and our cattle?*”

It is interesting that they do not turn to God for help with this, isn’t it? They yell at Moses instead. Any flaws that Moses has have been magnified by the magic-mirror way they are

looking at both him and the problem they are facing. Whatever is good, beautiful and right is reduced to almost nothing. Therefore, there is no point in praying. There is no point in having a conversation as a community of believers. There is no point in looking for water! Moses' flaws are so glaring that it must all be his fault. This must be the way it always was. A cruel set-up. A joke to make the trolls and hobgoblins laugh. (Not to mention the Egyptians...)

The magic-mirror way of looking at the world is *not* the way things really are. Warm tears of love melt the ice and wash away the splinters of glass in little Kay's heart and eye. "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, which has been given to us," writes Paul in the Letter to the Romans. Not because we are particularly good, but because, as Gerald May points out in *The Awakened Heart*^[1], we are created in love and because we dwell in love and because we are made for love. That is how things really are. Moses strikes the rock and water flows from it. The water is there, even when it looks like it could not possibly be.

When the Samaritan woman arrives at the well to draw water, she may indeed have a bit of that magic mirror stuck in her heart, and in her eyes. The author of the Gospel of John tells us that it is about noon, an unusual time for a woman to be going to the well. It has been widely extrapolated from that and from Jesus' response to her about her many husbands, that she is an outsider in the community, shunned by the other women, and therefore unwelcome at the usual gathering times around the well, in the relative cool of the morning or evening. The text tells nothing of her tone in the conversation with Jesus, but I wonder whether she might be a bit angry-clever and well defended. She has spent many years being seen through the lens of judgment and condemnation. So,

now what? "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" Men did not talk with women in public places; and Jews shunned Samaritans. What is he really getting at? What does he really want? Jesus' answer that if she knew the gift of God and who was asking, she would have asked him and he would have given her living water is followed by: "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob?" Who do you think you are? Do you think you can pull something like that over on *me*? I am not going to be snowed that easily.

"Everyone who drinks of *this* water will be thirsty again," says Jesus, "but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." "[*ironic chuckle*] I'd like to see you give me some of *that* water; sounds good to me that I'll never be thirsty again or have to keep coming to this darn well to get water in this heat or worry about running into those difficult, judgmental folks..."

"Okay," says Jesus. "Go, call your husband, and come back" – and I will give you the water.

I imagine that when Jesus tells her about all the male companions she had, she tries to tell herself at first that it is not so surprising that he knows about her life; after all, it must feel to her that *everyone* knows all about it... but there is something in his manner that is starting to move her. He is looking at her so directly; he is laughing with her; he is really *with* her despite all her attempts to keep him at arm's length, as she learned to do with everyone and with their judgments. Nevertheless, it is when he answers her

questions about differences in worship with the words: "The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth..." that I think she truly hears Good News. This is good news, radical news, *the way things really are*: God is for everyone, not just those in a particular temple or on a particular mountain, or in a particular denomination or diocese. Her heart is open, the piece of magic mirror is becoming dislodged, and she looks at him with the openness and directness he has shown her, saying musingly: "I know that Messiah is coming..."

"I am he."

Now the spring *is* gushing up inside her as she leaves her water jar behind and runs to tell the others. She is no longer isolated. She is no longer trapped in her own anger and cleverness. She is no longer afraid. She is no longer cut off. The spring of water has gushed up and washed away the splinters of glass that have lodged in her heart, in her eyes; fully human, fully connected, dwelling in the love that is the fount of our being, *this is how things really are*. "Come and see!"

It has been said that the evil one works by isolating us, by creating the illusion that we are alone and separate. In this illusion of separateness, we forget that we are all one, interconnected, interdependent, in a web of belonging and love. This is, of course, the illusion that allows us to use the earth's resources so greedily and cavalierly. This illusion encourages us to accept poverty and war as just the way things are. This illusion makes policies in workplaces prohibiting the discussion of how much different people are being paid, so that we may remain blind to the fact that the

janitor or cafeteria worker or data-entry operator whom we see every day can't possibly afford housing and food on... how much an hour? \$6? \$7? \$8? (When a living wage has been determined to be more like \$17...). This illusion divides us into us and them, within the church and outside it. This illusion of separateness is the illusion of the troll's magic mirror. Jesus calls us to community, to connection. It is a beautiful and Godly thing. However, let us not make this sound easy. Disillusion is rarely comfortable. What do you suppose happens when a spring bursts through all the walls and barriers that have been built up to keep it in?

A lot of stuff gets broken.

Ouch. [*hand on heart*]

Ah.

Nevertheless, we honor brokenness week by week in this place, as a community, when we come to the altar and share in the broken body and blood of Jesus Christ. We honor our brokenness in the way that I have heard the broken bread and the wine offered at St. Stephen's to *all* who want to share in it, Episcopalian or Anglo-Catholic or Southern Baptist, Christian or non-Christian, up here in the sanctuary, and downstairs at [Loaves and Fishes](#).

We *are* broken. We *are* flawed. Not everyone feels welcome here, all the time. We are constantly forgetting our connectedness and isolating ourselves from one another and from the world

around us.

The magic-mirror way of looking at brokenness is that all is lost, all is broken, we are alone and abandoned, and there is no hope. *That is not the way things really are.* We know something different is true. There is a spring of living water within us gushing up to eternal life, coming up through all the broken places, transforming them into openings to grace.

The Samaritan woman, broken, isolated and alone, came to the well to draw water.

Look who was already there, waiting for her.

[1] Gerald G. May, *The Awakened Heart: Opening Yourself to the Love You Need* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991).