

Now I Become Myself
Rev. Gary Kowalski
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May Sarton, whom we honor on this Sunday in Women's History month, was perhaps nominally a Unitarian, or maybe not. My colleague Reverend Richard Henry, who spoke at her funeral in 1995, liked to say that we claimed her more than she claimed us. As a child of ten, she visited the First Parish in Cambridge, where her family lived at the time, her father an instructor in the history of science at Harvard, and the minister's sermon that day made a deep impression on her. Sixty years later, she testified that the minister's words "really marked me for life. I can hear him saying, 'Go into the inner chamber of your soul—and shut the door.' The slight pause after 'soul' did it. A revelation to the child who heard it and who never has forgotten it."

She once said that if she attended any church, it would be one of ours. But she was an inveterate individualist and never a joiner. Instead, her religion was to notice the rays of afternoon sun transforming an autumn hillside. Her religion was poetry, "if (in her words) to be a poet means allowing life to flow through one rather than forcing it to a mold the will has shaped; if it means learning to let the day shape the work, not the work, the day, and so live toward essence as naturally as a bird"

In her *Journal of a Solitude* Sarton described what she meant by prayer. "If one looks long enough at almost anything, looks with absolute attention at a flower, a stone, the bark of a tree, grass, snow, a cloud something like revelation takes place. Something is 'given' and perhaps that something is always a reality outside the self. We are aware of God only when we cease to be aware of ourselves, not in the negative sense of denying self, but in the sense of losing self in admiration and joy." in her poem, "Of Prayer," Sarton wrote

It is a mistake, perhaps, to believe
That religion concerns you at all ...

She was born in Belgium in 1912, but the family emigrated to the United States when she was still quite young to escape the turmoil of war in Europe. In *Plant Dreaming Deep*, she summarized the first half of her long life:

For forty-five years or so, I lived very happily without owning property, and in fact would have considered the owning of property a definite hazard. I felt then no responsibility except the talent. I wandered, borrowing other

people's lives, other people's families, with the nostalgia of the only child ...

A turning point came in her late thirties, when her mother died after a long illness. "I have come to believe that the way people die expresses the central person as clearly as the way they have lived or the way they have loved," she wrote. "My mother, as I accompanied her through long months of a gradual waning, never once complained or begged to be released from pain; she seemed to fold herself inward like a closing flower, to detach herself gently from all she had loved, to 'let go' until she seemed to us to have become nothing but light, an impersonal light, as if there were nothing left for death to take but the soul itself." Not long after, her father also died, dropping from a heart attack that she said felled him like a great oak. The loss of her parental foundations shocked and challenged and in a sense liberated Sarton, who discovered she had to rebuild her own identity from the ground up. She was like a vessel set loose from its moorings, not adrift but needing to chart its own course.

Alone now in my life, no longer child,
This hour and its flood of mystery
Where death and love are wholly reconciled,
Launches the ship of all my history.
Accomplished now is the last struggling birth,
I have slipped out from the embracing shore
Nor look for comfort to maternal earth.
I shall not be a daughter any more,
But through this final parting, all stripped down,
Launched on the tide of love, go out full grown.

From her mother, an artist, she had gained an elevated sense of taste, and from her father, the scholar, an appreciation for rigor and discipline. "I knew, from having watched my father hack down the incredible amount of work he accomplished day by day and year by year, how supportive a routine is," she wrote, "how the spirit moves around free in it as it does in a plain New England church. Routine is not a prison, but the way into freedom from time. The apparently measured time has immeasurable space within it, and in this it resembles music," or perhaps a sonnet. Her schedule, like her verse, was carefully structured and deliberately arranged. Mealtimes and afternoon rambles with the dog became ritualized. She lived alone by choice. She needed solitude and quiet and above all time for herself.

As far as I can see from here almost everyone I know is trying to do the impossible every day. All mothers, all writers, all artists of every kind, every human being who has work to do and still wants to stay human and to be responsive to another human beings' needs, joys and sorrows. There is

never enough time ...

It is hard for women, perhaps, to be 'one-pointed,' much harder for them to clear space around whatever it is they want to do beyond household chores and family life. Their lives are fragmented ... this is the cry I get in so many letters—the cry not so much for 'a room of one's own' as for time of one's own.

Her ambition to live life on her own terms and at her own pace made her a role model for many women struggling with issues of independence and self-determination. To step out from under the shadow of parents and mentors and become authentically herself was the task she set herself in the second half of life.

But authenticity had its costs. In 1965 her literary agent advised her not to even try to publish the novel *Mrs. Stevens Hears The Mermaids Singing*, the work where Sarton came out as a lesbian. Her lectureship at Wellesley College was canceled as a result, shaking her world once more.

In her journal *Recovering* she wrote, "In spite of all the doors opening these days that permit homosexuals to enter the stream of life instead of being treated as outcasts forever relegated to the back waters, pariahs whom it is bes to pretend do not exist, there is still much civilizing to be accomplished." She goes on to quote favorably her fellow poet Adrienne Rich:

I believe it is the Lesbian in every woman who is compelled by female energy, who gravitates toward strong women, who seeks a literature that will express that energy and strength. It is the Lesbian in us who drives us to feel imaginatively, render in language, grasp the full connection between woman and woman.

Yet Sarton also resisted those who wanted to label her as a "lesbian writer." She herself preferred to be known as a humanist—one who attempted to find within the dimensions of her own experience truths that might be universal and common to all people. For that, complete candor and honesty was required. In her *Journal of a Solitude* she wrote,

If we are to understand the human condition, and if we are to accept ourselves in all the complexity, self-doubt, extravagance of feeling, guilt, joy, the slow freeing of the self to its full capacity for action and creation ... we have to know all we can about each other, and we have to be willing to go naked.

“Going naked,” of course, was intended metaphorically rather than literally. There was little in Sarton’s work that was titillating or salacious. When she did write of love, it was with tenderness and gentle eroticism as in her poem “The Snow Light.

In the snow light,
In the swan light,
In the white-on-white light
Of a winter’s storm,
My delight and your delight
Kept each other warm.

But honesty meant that life’s ragged edges were also on display: depression, anger, loneliness and monotony. Her novel *A Reckoning* which deals with cancer has become a guidebook for many people struggling with terminal diagnoses. Her journal *After the Stroke* chronicles the tedious road to recovery after suffering a brain injury. One so totally dedicated to reality was bound to share her own pain. But Sarton’s aim was always to find some significance within the agony—not merely to produce a howl of anguish but to make a statement. Whether she wrote of personal struggles or of political and social conflicts, her words sparked fire, as in her poem “At Kent State.”

The war games are over,
The laurels all cut down.
We’ll to the woods no more
With live ammunition
To murder our own children
Because they hated war.

But even when her words were harsh and disillusioned, there remained an inward core of faith and optimism within all Sarton’s work. Maybe the old saying is true, that nothing really bad can ever happen to a writer, since it all becomes grist for the mill. And for Sarton, every experience had value insofar as it could illuminate our shared humanity, even and perhaps especially the experience of aging, of ripening and sensing approaching death, as in her poem “Gestalt At Sixty.”

How rich and long the hours become,
How brief the years,
In this house of gathering,
This life about to enter its seventh decade.

I live like a baby
Who bursts into laughter

As a sunbeam on the wall,
Or like a very old woman
Entranced by the prick of stars
Through the leaves.

And now, as the fruit gathers
All the riches of summer
Into its compact world,
I feel richer than ever before,
And breathe a larger air,

I am not ready to die,
But I am learning to trust death
As I have trusted life.
I am moving
Toward a new freedom
Born of detachment,
And a sweeter grace —
Learning to let go.

I am not ready to die,
But as I approach sixty
I turn my face toward the sea.
I shall go where tides replace time,
Where my world will open to a far horizon.

Over the floating, never-still flux and change.
I shall go with the changes,
I shall look far out over golden grasses
And blue waters....

There are no farewells.

Praise God for His mercies,
For His austere demands,
For His light
And for His darkness.

When Sarton delivered the annual Ware Lecture to the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in 1982, UUA President Gene Pickett introduced her as "our poet." But she could be critical of religious liberals whom she found could focus too much on the here and now, to the neglect of the eternal and transcendent. When she read her more religious poems at a Unitarian church in Vermont, she found the reception lukewarm. 'I suppose it went all

right,'she recorded in *Journal of a Solitude*, 'but I felt...that the kind, intelligent people gathered in a big room looking out on pine trees did not really want to think about God. His absence... or His presence. Both are too frightening."

And what did God mean to Sartre? As a child, I suppose, she had learned on a Sunday morning to go into the inner chamber of her soul and close the door - where even when feeling most vulnerable, most mortal, most human, she could never really be alone.