

**The Search for Faith:
Comparing Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" to W. H. Auden's "Lullaby"**
(for the Pacific Unitarian Church Writing Group, December 2023)

by Leslie Burkhardt

*Though today may be a day of smiles, tomorrow's still in doubt
And what brings me joy, may bring you care and woe;
We're born to die, but don't know why, or what it's all about
And the more we try to learn the less we know.*

George M. Cohan (1878-1942) from the song "Life's a Funny Proposition After All" from
the American Musical *Little Johnny Jones* (1904).
(Put to music at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1zGPBqHKCgk>)

My thought about faith is that it exists to connect a conscious person to the collective journey of the life force. Without that connection, a person has less chance of consciously contributing to the continual search for better ways to exist.

Two poems that examine faith were written during and shortly after a time of great social upheaval in notions of faith in the Western World: *Dover Beach* (1851, rev. 1888) by Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) and *Lullaby* (1937) by W.H. Auden (1907-1973). During this time, emerging theories of evolution challenged the creation myths that were the foundation of Western religion. Faith in these myths was further weakened as sources of wisdom and guidance in the face of unimaginably devastating and horrific carnage waged against multitudes of common people by God-ordained Christian leaders.

Also, with the advent of more affordable access to publications for more people, more individuals (in the era of these two authors, primarily economically advantaged, white males) became better able to reach beyond the Bible in the family parlor. They learned that there was much greater diversity in the way people lived. They became better able to look at themselves and decide who they were and who they wanted to be. During this time of turbulent change and questioning, both of these poems became bellwethers for many in their generations and the generations that followed who were exploring notions of faith.

The 20th century psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) expressed the upheavals in faith of that era in this way, speaking about the time of his childhood as someone who also had ready access to historical and philosophical texts. "The great news of the day was the work of Charles Darwin. Shortly before this, I had been living with the still medieval concepts of my parents, for whom the world and men were still presided over by divine omnipotence and providence. This world had become antiquated and obsolete. My Christian faith had become relative through its encounter with Eastern religious and Greek philosophy." [Note 1]

Both Arnold and Auden, by the time each of their respective poems had run their course to the last words of their last stanzas, acknowledged that their faith, rather than being

discarded, had expanded beyond dogmatic creeds that could not accommodate more individualistic realities. After these two poems had long-since become well-known to the Western literary community, neither author wholly disregarded their reliance on aspects of the more homogeneous collective faith that had played a dominant role in each of their upbringings. Arnold came to believe that conventional religion was an important source of historical text. While he could not support more absolute and literal interpretations of the Bible, he believed it to be an important source in the development of moral guidance [Note 2]. Auden, by comparison, found great comfort, especially as he aged, for the ritual and ceremony associated with the Church of England [Note 3]. For both authors, their faith became stronger and more authentic when it also became more oriented toward their own personal perceptions and sensibilities.

In 1851, with revisions made during the year prior to his death in 1888, Arnold placed his faith in authentic and loving relationships, "Ah, love, let us be true to one another! for the world...hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light, nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain..." Some 86 years later in 1937, Auden wrote his verse during the years that followed WWI, the war that came to epitomize the notion of men as "cannon fodder," a phrase coined in 1814. [Note 4]

As evidenced by another poem Auden wrote titled *Matthew Arnold* [Note 5] as well as the fact that both poems have a four-stanza structure, it appeared that *Dover Beach* was very much on his mind when Auden composed *Lullaby*. In *Lullaby*, he seemed only able to cling to a faith devoid of any hereafter, inspired by brief moments of transient love, "Certainty, fidelity on the stroke of midnight pass...but from this night not a whisper, not a thought, not a kiss nor look be lost...Let the winds of dawn that blow softly round your dreaming head such a day of welcome show; Eye and knocking heart may bless, find the mortal world enough."

I end my contemplation of these two pivotal works with the most well-known final stanza of *Dover Beach*:

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

I would simply respond that it doesn't seem as if humanity can reasonably disavow either the joys or the horrors of human existence. And perhaps when the horrors overwhelm the joys, individuals who survive whatever calamity has befallen their world, may decide, in protest, despair or utter agony, to cease to procreate or even exist, or, as is often the case, to try to destroy the perceived source of their sufferings. For many of

us, our faith, our myths, our belief systems will follow in lock-step with our strongly inbred instinct to survive.

Thus, for most of us, for as long as we are consigned to the world of the living, our belief systems, in search of more tolerable existences, strive to create life that is more comfortable, loving and hopeful for ourselves and for our perceived loved ones, regardless of whether this might be possible or not. I realize that this may be a daunting assessment of life for many. However, it follows that my personal faith believes that intentional, critical, purposeful, compassionate and continuing thought and effort in the direction of improving our lives, provides each of us with the best chance to minimize the sorrows and cruelties while maximizing the joy and love in our lives and our world.

O come, you Wisdom from on high,
from depths that hide within a sigh,
to temper knowledge with our care,
to render every act a prayer.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
shall come within as Hope to dwell.

(O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. Taken
December 14, 2022
from: <https://farfringe.com/stlt225-o-com-e-o-come-emmanuel/>)

Or as Jim Hull of Pasadena, CA
(JimHull.com) remarked
on December 18, 2022:

We trust what comforts, not what's true
To see the truth would make us rue
And so we stomp through life hell-bent
Full of ourselves, with wrong intent

And to our dying day we miss
The little things that give us bliss
Instead, we live to prove we're right
And rather die than lose that fight.

NOTES:

1. Carl G. Jung et al., *Man and his Symbols* (London: Aldus Books Limited, 1964), p. 57.

2. "According to the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Arnold most likely wrote *Dover Beach* in the early 1850s, which was a time when religion and science were commonly viewed as antithetical. This bleak, opposing viewpoint is seen in the first edition. Then, near the end of his life in the 1870s and 80s, Arnold began to more widely promote the Church of England. At this point, he personally reconciles science and religion by rejecting 'the literalist interpretation of the Bible,' instead viewing the Bible and the Church as more of a historical text and lens by which good morals can be learned (Collini). Later in his life, Arnold places more importance on this revised version of Christianity. With this context in mind, Arnold's religious shift can now be seen through an exploration of the 1867 and 1888 editions of *Dover Beach*. By analyzing the stylistic changes Arnold makes to the poem, it becomes clear that Arnold's edits to word choice and capitalization work to provide insight into how his views of religion and science change: uncertain to hopeful for a return of faith as a moral guide for the nation." Taken 11-24-2022

from: <https://blogs.baylor.edu/19crs/2019/07/19/tracing-the-evolution-of-matthew-arnolds-religious-thought-an-analysis-of-stylistic-changes-to-dover-beach/>

3. Auden's poem is his lullaby to a younger lover. "...not specifically stated to be a casual male pickup; the lover is sleeping and the poet is awake and adopting – in non-biological ways – a nurturing role. Auden once stated about his pickups: 'With boys I understand what a parent feels.'" Quote from Norman Page, *Auden and Isherwood: The Berlin Years* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), p. 29. Taken 11-24-2022

from: <https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/an-introduction-to-w-h-audens-lullaby>

4. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cannon_fodder (taken December 21, 2022).

5. *Matthew Arnold* by W.H. Auden

His gift knew what he was — a dark disordered city;
Doubt hid it from the father's fond chastising sky;
Where once the mother-farms had glowed protectively,
Stood the haphazard alleys of the neighbours' pity.

—Yet would have gladly lived in him and learned his ways,
And grown observant like a beggar, and become
Familiar with each square and boulevard and slum,
And found in the disorder a whole world to praise.

But all his homeless reverence, revolted, cried:
"I am my father's forum and he shall be heard,
Nothing shall contradict the holy final word,
Nothing." And thrust his gift in prison till it died,

And left him nothing but a jailor's voice and face,
And all rang hollow but the clear denunciation
Of a gregarious optimistic generation
That saw itself already in a father's place. (taken 12-3-2022
from: <https://www.sheilaomalley.com/?p=151882>)

ADDENDUM: Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" and W. H. Auden's "Lullaby"

***Dover Beach* (1851, revised 1888) Matthew Arnold (1822-1888)**

The sea is calm tonight.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits; on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England
stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and
fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's
shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and
flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

***Lullaby* (1937) W. H. Auden (1907-1973)**

Lay your sleeping head, my love,
Human on my faithless arm;
Time and fevers burn away
Individual beauty from
Thoughtful children, and the grave
Proves the child ephemeral:
But in my arms till break of day
Let the living creature lie,
Mortal, guilty, but to me
The entirely beautiful.

Soul and body have no bounds:
To lovers as they lie upon
Her tolerant enchanted slope
In their ordinary swoon,
Grave the vision Venus sends
Of supernatural sympathy,
Universal love and hope;
While an abstract insight wakes
Among the glaciers and the rocks
The hermit's carnal ecstasy.

Certainty, fidelity
On the stroke of midnight pass
Like vibrations of a bell,
And fashionable madmen raise
Their pedantic boring cry:
Every farthing of the cost,
All the dreaded cards foretell,
Shall be paid, but from this night
Not a whisper, not a thought,
Not a kiss nor look be lost.

Beauty, midnight, vision dies:
Let the winds of dawn that blow
Softly round your dreaming head
Such a day of welcome show
Eye and knocking heart may bless,
Find the mortal world enough;
Noons of dryness find you fed
By the involuntary powers,
Nights of insult let you pass
Watched by every human love.