

Wyoming Tribune Eagle of October 20, 2016: "Cousins come together from across the globe"

When my cousin in Germany decided on a visit to the States for fall of 2016, she and I spent months planning possible activities and travels. Among other things, we agreed to set aside time for exercising our voices in song, as we've done in the past whenever getting together. Although Edith and I tend to concentrate on German songs that seem to us poetic, we thought it significant that, halfway through her sojourn, the Nobel committee decided to honor the poetry in the songs of Bob Dylan.

My cousin was named after me, a fact that has helped us maintain a bond of friendship where others dissolved. Over the decades we have visited back and forth, often with spouses and children in tow. Hosting a group of several visitors within a limited timespan to tour, e.g., San Francisco, Yosemite National Park, or the Catalina Islands, tends to impinge on lengthy or in-depth discussion. This time, however, our get-together was just for the two of us as we celebrated Edith's two-and-a-half years of cancer-free living. We allotted for ourselves an entire month.

The evening after her arrival, spying a harvest moon hanging low on the horizon, Edith brought forth an ode to the moon into which I readily joined. The stanzas evoke shades of Robert Frost: A woods swaying silent and dark, a meadow giving off whispers of fog, a moon rising amid a host of stars. Then the speaker alludes to the toil of a workday just ended, difficult relations with a sick neighbor, burdens mismanaged or misjudged. The speaker/singer ends with a prayer for a peaceful night's sleep.

From there Edith crossed into another tune known to both of us, which addresses a dearly beloved. Like many a Dylan song, like many a Frost poem, this Lied grows darker as it progresses, until it ends with a stanza that states: "And someday when I'm dead / and you recall us of an evening before falling asleep / you must remember me without weeping."

On previous occasion my cousin and I discussed the dismal lyrics Elvis Presley attached to the songs he imported from Germany. An example is "A Wooden Heart," which consists of a series of banal sentiments strung together to simulate the emotion of the original—"Muss i denn zum Städtele hinaus" focuses on saying good-bye to a loved one. Elvis may have had his Dylan moments, but his imports aren't among them.

Poetry is sometimes accused of having evolved as a high-brow exercise in circularity—poets writing for other poets. But a song that tackles the human predicament with candor while simultaneously acknowledging the joy amidst our sorrows is poetry made accessible to the many. So we sing them, my cousin and I.

A future free of cancer is far from certain for my cousin. When ovarian cancer was discovered and swiftly operated on in January of 2014, it had spread to a number of organs that had to be trimmed or excised. Edith said it's a blessing that none of the lymph nodes the surgeon removed showed any signs of cancer, which suggests the malignancy had not yet reached the bloodstream. We are hopeful.

Nevertheless, her stay here was not uniformly serene. Periods of discomfort intruded, some of which spiked into bouts of excruciating pain. At times she scarcely spoke of anything but hurting.

"Until two days before I boarded the plane I wondered whether I should risk the travel," she confided. "Yet I knew, if I canceled my flight reservation now, I'd never again book another." So we soldiered on, grateful for the mellow times when they came.

On her last day here, before leaving for Denver International Airport we were clicking cell-phone pictures outdoors, taking turns posing with Abby the dog. With open-mouthed wonder we spotted a pair of bald eagles swooping low before alighting on a utility pole. Then Edith presented me with a little speech.

"Now I must say something," she announced. "I came here to improve my English and to check out your place in the country. But what I gained was so much more. For this I must thank you with all my heart." She smiled happily, her eyes shining moist.

I knew exactly what she was trying to say. Would we see each other again? Perhaps yes, perhaps no. Yet our songs, voiced sometimes in harmony, sometimes in unison, are like poems committed to memory, poems that comfort, poems that will be with us when we toss and turn in the night, seeking to cross into the peace of sleep. They'll remind us not to cheapen our emotions nor seek to change the unchangeable—and, most of all, not to lament our respective fates with crocodile tears.