

Obscure Poet Remembered for Out-sized Impact

The Wired Word for the Week of May 2, 2021

In the News

The Kansas City Star recently published a retrospective on the city's native daughter, little-known secretary Frances Angermayer, and her World War II poem, "Conversion," about a soldier's talk with God on the eve of battle.

One hot June night in 1943, worried about the war, Frances couldn't sleep. She petitioned heaven on behalf of her stepbrother Glenn, who was stationed in the South Pacific. Sleep continued to elude her, so she got out of bed and sat down in front of her typewriter. She began thinking about how soldiers facing death would feel, especially if they didn't know God.

"I placed myself in such a situation, and the words of 'Conversion' came to me," Frances recalled. The words flowed from her fingers onto the keyboard, and 20 minutes later, the first draft of "A Soldier's Conversion," about a soldier's encounter with God on the eve of battle, took shape on the page before her eyes. Here is a portion of what she wrote:

Look, God, I have never spoken to You --
But now -- I want to say "How do You do."
You see, God, they told me You didn't exist --
And like a fool -- I believed all of this.
Last night from a shell hole I saw Your sky --
I figured right then they had told me a lie. ...
Funny -- I had to come to this hellish place,
Before I had the time to see Your face. ...
I guess the "zero hour" will soon be here,
But I'm not afraid since I know You're near. ...
Well, I will have to go now, God -- good-by!
Strange -- since I met You -- I'm not afraid to die.

Frances sent the poem to the Catholic publication, *Our Sunday Visitor*, which featured it in its July 18, 1943, edition. A year later, "Conversion" was broadcast on an Iowa radio show. Then *The Atlanta Constitution* reported that the poem had been found on the body of an American soldier in Italy. The text found its way into sermon illustrations, radio broadcasts, newspaper columns, including *The New York Times* and the *Hebrew Chronicle*, and even the Congress of the United States, often without attribution or remuneration, under various titles, such as "Poem Echo in Foxhole."

Actors Joe E. Brown and Shirley Temple recited "Conversion" on radio broadcasts. The poem was also set to music and recorded by singing cowboy Denver Darling.

More significantly, the verse a *New York Daily Mirror* columnist called "the outstanding poem of this war" made its way into the hands and hearts, pockets, barracks and foxholes of an estimated 6 million soldiers in Africa, Asia, the South Pacific, the Aleutian Islands and Europe. It was translated into several languages and became known as "the poem heard 'round the world."

On D-Day, June 6, 1944, a Catholic chaplain found 30 copies on the bodies of the injured and the dead on the beaches of Normandy. It was even found in Buchenwald, the Nazi concentration camp, and on the body of a dead Nazi soldier in northeastern France.

Lt. Harry C. Slawson of the Army's 102nd Signal Corps wrote to Frances: "I myself, the men under me and men far removed have known literal moments of 'hell' and the presence of God that you shared with us. ... I came across your poem just today. By tonight it had found its way to every man within the company -- and left its

mark. Men have died near me, men will die in the future, perhaps myself -- but I know this, the thought you have left with us will last beyond whatever may come in the future."

Army Cpl. John A. O'Connell, from Kansas City, Kansas, attributed his survival of the brutal Malmedy Massacre of the Battle of the Bulge, to his having committed "Conversion" to memory. On December 17, 1944, when his convoy was attacked, O'Connell and over 100 other U.S. soldiers were captured. The Nazis opened fire on their prisoners, deliberately killing survivors for almost six hours before pulling out. The severely wounded officer repeated the words of "Conversion" as he prayed for strength to remain still. Miraculously, he and a few others survived. As soon as he was able, he sent Frances his profound gratitude for her poem.

"Even now," the poet reflected 13 years later, "it is impossible for me to believe I wrote a poem that meant so much to so many."

When Frances died, July 25, 1993, at age 86, her obituary only mentioned her influential poem in passing.

According to the Rev. J.F. McGee, Frances' pastor, the reason Frances' poem had such a great appeal was because of the simplicity of the lines: "Big truths told in the simplest language that the plain man and woman understands and loves."

You can read or listen to Frances Angermayer's poem "Conversion" in its entirety at these links:

[A Prayer. Cresaljie](#)

[Meet the Humble Kansas City Woman Who Wrote the WWII Poem 'Heard 'Round the World.' *The Kansas City Star*](#)

The Big Questions

1. What, if anything, have you done that has had a surprising long-term impact on another, which you never considered any big deal?
2. What, if anything, have you endeavored to do that you deemed important, but which appears to have had little impact? If you knew beforehand that your efforts would be largely unnoticed or unsuccessful, would you still have invested your time and energy the way you did? Why or why not?
3. How does the ability to empathize with others impact one's ability to serve them effectively?
4. Who, if anyone, has had an extraordinary influence on your life, in spite of having an unassuming, humble demeanor? What impressed you most about that person?
5. What is the role of your faith in creating a positive and lasting legacy? If you could describe in one sentence the kind of legacy you would like to leave behind you, what would you say?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Exodus 35:25-26, 31-33

All the skillful women spun with their hands, and brought what they had spun in blue and purple and crimson yarns and fine linen; all the women whose hearts moved them to use their skill spun the goats' hair. ... [Then Moses said] ... [the Lord] has filled [Bezalel] with divine spirit, with skill, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft. (For context, read 35:20-35.)

As the Israelites prepared to build the tabernacle in the wilderness, Moses invited those with generous hearts to bring offerings of precious gems, minerals and spices, fine fabric, colorful yarn, leather, oil, wood and other

materials (vv. 4-9). He also called for skilled laborers to donate their carpentry, metalsmithing, engineering, textile artistry, weaving, spinning, perfumery and other skills to the work (vv. 10-19).

The people responded in a big way. "Both men and women" came, "everyone whose heart was stirred, and everyone whose spirit was willing," donated whatever materials and skills they could (vv. 21-22).

The women brought skill and passion to their work with tapestry and fabric, and the Lord gifted Bezalel and his apprentice Oholiab with inspiration and logistical know-how to put everything together.

For some reason, this passage reminds us of the fable of [Stone Soup \(Video 7:43\)](#) about how hungry villagers learned to share what they had to make a meal that satisfied the entire population.

Questions: What happens when people hoard their assets and abilities, using them only for themselves? What happens when people willingly share what they have for a cause larger than themselves? What does this tell us about how to live as God's people in the world today?

Acts 6:5-7

What [the Twelve] said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. (For context, read 6:1-10.)

Sometimes people with a low-level job title end up making just as great a difference in the lives of others as people with high-level positions do. Consider the seven men who were appointed to assist with fair distribution of food in the early church.

Now the 12 apostles believed their primary calling was to pray and preach the word of God, not to wait on tables. But they recognized the need for Spirit-filled, wise leaders to take on that responsibility. After all, they had served the hungry before (5,000 in one case and 4,000 in another, plus women and children, as recorded in Matthew 14:13-21 and 15:32-38). They knew how important it was to Jesus to care for the needs of the body as well as those of the soul.

Delegating some ministries to others had the effect of attracting more people who wanted to become disciples of Jesus. That was due, at least in part, to the fact that the seven men who were chosen for this ministry proved to be more than fillers of food boxes and organizers of soup kitchens. Two of the seven in particular had ministries far beyond serving at table.

Deacon Stephen performed great wonders and signs among the people, and spoke so powerfully about Jesus that he gained enemies who eventually stoned him to death (Acts 7:1-60). His martyrdom led to the scattering of disciples, and the further spread of the gospel (Acts 8:1-4).

Deacon Philip went to Samaria, where his message about Jesus was accompanied by healings, exorcisms, conversions and baptisms (Acts 8:5-8, 12). Afterwards, Philip was directed to travel toward Gaza, where he met an African eunuch who was the finance minister of the queen of Ethiopia. Philip was able to explain that the prophet Isaiah's words about the suffering servant referred to Jesus, whereupon Philip baptized the court official at his request. Then the Lord snatched Philip away, and he continued preaching the good news in every town he entered (Acts 8:26-40).

Frances Angermayer was a shy secretary in a physician's office her entire working career. No doubt she did her job faithfully. She was terrified of public speaking. Yet God had a larger purpose for her life, one that astonished her, when she glimpsed the extent of the ministry God had for her through her simple poem.

Questions: Have you ever felt limited in the ways you can serve God by lack of certain credentials or titles? Do you need letters in front of or behind your name in order to effectively fulfill the role to which God calls you? Why or why not?

1 Corinthians 12:12, 19-22

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ... If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, (For context, read 12:4-26.)

In this chapter, Paul uses the metaphor of the human body to explain how spiritual gifts function in the church. Just as a body has many organs, limbs and systems in order to function properly, so in the body of Christ there are many members, each having a different purpose that serves the needs of the church as a whole (12:4-7).

What ties a physical body together? In simple terms, it is blood coursing through the veins, air pumping through the body, and the brain that provides direction to each organ, limb and system.

What ties "the varieties of gifts, ... services, ... and activities" in the body of Christ together? "The same Spirit ... the same Lord ... the same God who activates all of them in everyone."

Questions: Is it okay to desire other spiritual gifts than the ones you have? Why or why not? When you realize you don't have a spiritual gift that a particular situation calls for, what should you do?

1 Corinthians 1:26-29

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. (For context, read 1:20-31.)

At the beginning of this letter to the Corinthian believers, Paul raised the issue of divisions that were causing quarrels among them (vv. 10-17). Paul urged them not to get distracted by their differences, but to "be united in the same mind and the same purpose" (v. 10).

That purpose? To boast not in self, in one's own wisdom, power, credentials, resume, ethnicity, tribe or other distinctions, but to boast in the Lord alone, the source of our life in Christ Jesus (vv. 30-31).

The apostle pointed out that even by human standards, not many in the congregation could lay claim to great wisdom, power or nobility of birth. Yet in spite of what they lacked, God still chose them, so that on the backdrop of their foolishness, weakness and lowliness, God might show himself wise, strong and worthy of all praise and honor.

God often picks the unlikeliest of people to carry out his mission. Time and space do not permit us to tell the story of every biblical figure who fits that description, but here are a few who come to mind:

- The apostle Andrew was not one of Jesus' inner circle of three, like his more flamboyant brother, yet it was Andrew who introduced Peter to the Lord (John 1:35-42). Without the more restrained Andrew, we might not have the gospel of Mark, for which Peter is thought by some to be the main source for the author, or either of the letters said to be written by Peter.
- Jesus commended a poor widow who gave two small coins out of her poverty; he said her gift was greater than all the donations rich people gave out of their abundance (Luke 21:1-4).
- A disciple named Tabitha (or Dorcas), touched the lives of many widows by using her gift with a needle and thread. After she died, Peter prayed for her, and she rose from her deathbed, leading many to faith in the Lord (Acts 9:36-42).

- The woman who anointed Jesus was sharply criticized by onlookers for "wasting" precious ointment, yet Jesus declared her act "a good service" of kindness. "She has done what she could," he said, and her deed would be proclaimed throughout the whole world in remembrance of her (Mark 14:3-9).

As disability rights advocate Helen Keller wrote, "When we do the best that we can, we never know what miracle is wrought in our life, or in the life of another."

Questions: When have you performed an act of kindness or service, or "done what you could," thinking it a little thing, only to discover that it meant more than you ever imagined it might to someone? What small thing can you do with whatever small gift you have that could grow into a greater blessing for others?

For Further Discussion

1. Here is the only other poem by Frances Angermayer we were able to locate, found on a website dedicated to gardening:

I stood in a lovely garden one night --
 And I marveled at the enchanting sight!
 When lo! There, in the Cathedral-like hush
 I heard the swish of a painter's brush.
 I saw the flowers and the trees in prayer,
 And knew the Great Gardener was working there.

What emotions do you think Angermayer is attempting to evoke in this poem? What common themes does this poem share with the "Conversion" text?

2. React to this, from *The Wired Word* team member Frank Ramirez, who called Angermayer's poem "a great example of what I used to call 'a bulletin board' poem, back in the days before the internet, when people would cut things out and thumbtack them up for others to read. The clippings would take on a life of their own.

"During the pandemic I've been reading a lot of great poetry," wrote Ramirez, "but what amazes me is how what some would call 'doggerel,' poems with awkward meter or imperfect rhymes, has an extraordinary impact. There's an extraordinary power in words like these that can only be described as Spirit-driven.

"I like to say there is Scripture with an uppercase S, which we use to refer to the Bible, but there is also scripture with a lowercase 's' which also breathes life and God's presence and inspires people. We see it in homey sayings stitched into samplers, sometimes with misspelled words.

"The author of 'Casey at the Bat' was a serious writer who learned to live with a poem that he considered trivial," Ramirez continued. "The author of 'I Never Saw A Purple Cow' once wrote a sequel:

Oh, yes, I wrote the Purple Cow.
 I'm sorry that I wrote it.
 But I can tell you anyhow
 I'll kill you if you quote it.

"Actually," Ramirez added, "I think Shakespeare expected to be remembered as the author of 'Venus and Adonis' and 'The Rape of Lucrece,' two long poems that were reprinted constantly in his lifetime, and which he took great pains to publish properly. He probably would have been astonished that we care so much about the 'TV scripts' he wrote (and acted in) which he never took pains to publish himself.

"My guess is that other preachers, like myself, have sometimes been told by an individual that a sermon from 30 years ago had a tremendous impact, and we ourselves can't remember anything about it."

3. Comment on this, from Robert W. Fuller, author of *Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank*, and former president of Oberlin College: "Even the grandest somebodies have nobodies within. We all know people considered by others to be nobodies, who nonetheless comport themselves like kings and queens. ... When we accept the nobody within us, we lose the impulse to nobody others. When we identify the somebody inside, we tap into our capacity to make a public contribution."

4. In his book, *Buck Naked Faith: A Brutally Honest Look at Stunted Christianity*, Eric Sandras, a founder of Vineyard's Emerging Leaders Initiative, wrote: "The kingdom of God ... may start off as small as a mustard seed, but given time and the right opportunities, it should grow way out of proportion to that unnoticeable beginning.

"The potential we pack," Sandras continued, "has more to do with God's presence working within and through us than with how qualified we feel. When we grasp the truth that we can become co-laborers with Jesus and learn to live a much bigger story than our own microfocused lives, we will grow and grow and grow. ...

"God created me to play a crucial part in his huge story. But so often, I stunt my growth and try to live a micro story of my own making. Why do I do that? Why do I get distracted by my minuscule story?"

According to Sandras, God has a metanarrative, "a larger story that explains the big picture of what's going on. ... Jesus is the expert on the metanarrative and the micronarrative. He understands the overall story and how my story fits into his Book of Life. It's not all about me. Bonsai faith [that deliberately stunts my growth] needs me to make my story look big. A faith in which I'm working together with Jesus needs me to see my story as part of his. It urges me to discover how my story reflects and connects with the overarching story of a just and gracious God. ... So the quest is to avoid losing the awesome larger story under an inflated [and exaggerated] sense of our own story's importance. I want to merge my story into his."

How do you see the micronarrative/metanarrative concept at work in Angermayer's life? In your own?

Responding to the News

1. Eric Sandras (see For Further Discussion Item #4 above) suggests: "There's a big difference between asking God to be a part of our story and our becoming a part of his. Ask Jesus to give you eyes to see something he is doing this week that you can be a part of. No matter how large or small it appears, commit to be obedient. You may have to step out of your routine."

2. For more information on the topic of spiritual gifts, see [Origin of Spiritual Gifts Profiles. Christianity Today](#). Taking a Spiritual Gifts inventory test can help you identify your own spiritual gifts.

Prayer suggested by 1 Peter 4:9-10; 1 Corinthians 7:7; Ephesians 4:7-8

O God, whether our gifts are many or few, help us to be good stewards of your manifold grace, that we may serve others with whatever gift each of us has received, relying on the strength you supply, that you may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ at work in and through us. Amen.