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Lot's Wife:
An Exploration of Nursing and Calls, Guided by Two Poems

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Abstract

The article is a discussion on the theme of "the call" that formed the basis for Dr. Ted George's series of presentations at the Canadian Hermeneutic Institute (CHI) in 2021. It takes up two poems, both entitled "Lot's Wife," that are interpreted from the point of view of nurses who have to make decisions routinely in response to the demands of patients in actual settings of practice. The poems, by Anna Akhmatova and Wislawa Szymborska, treat the theme in contrasting ways that allows for a series of interpretive reflections, first considering a two-sided contrast between external regulation and anguish, and secondly a diverse array of "calls" to decision and action. A version of the article was first presented at CHI 2021.

Keywords

Poetry, nursing, call, hermeneutics

"Philosophy reads supreme poetry and is read by it. Both intuit common ground, that originating art and music of thought which inform our sense of the meaning of the world (*der Weltsinn*)"
George Steiner (Steiner, 2011, p. 101).

Note on Method

This article was first written as a presentation for the Canadian Hermeneutic Institute in 2021. Dr. Ted George, who was the visiting scholar for that year's Institute, chose the theme of "the call,"

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arguing that the world calls out to us and compels us to respond, and that how we respond to any given call is a hermeneutic practice. My paper was of course written in anticipation of Dr. George's discussion, addressing his topic and the question posed in the call for abstracts, "how do we know what we are supposed to do"? I took up the topic in relation to nursing, since that is my profession though the following discussion is not, I hope, confined to nursing too inflexibly. It is not about nursing as a vocation, a call-of-calls that brings a person into a profession, a discipline, and a working life, but a lower-key attempt to discuss the question of what we are supposed to do once the vocational leap has been taken, what we are supposed to do day-to-day and moment-to-moment in instances of practice that join up over time into a career. For my method, or way into the question, I looked for inspiration in poems in the belief that great poetry gets under the skin of life yet leaves open the maximum space for interpretation and reinterpretation.

Lot's Wife

My discussion is based on two poems, both entitled "Lot's Wife," which I argue provide rich material to consider nursing practice and what calls us, what orients us to what we are supposed to do. Lot's wife of course is that famous character from the Old Testament who was turned into a pillar of salt. According to Genesis, Lot gave hospitality to "two angels" whom he protected from the citizens of Sodom. They then reveal to Lot that their actual mission is to destroy the city entirely, and they are offering Lot and his family an escape pass, provided they do not look back: Genesis 19:17 "look not behind thee." And so they flee the city, "But his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt" (Genesis 19:26). As the book of Genesis tells it, the story seems to be a straightforward instructional narrative of God's righteous judgement, His immense power, the rewards of faith and obedience, and the price of disobedience. Lot's wife is a cipher, she is never named, and her only role is to suffer her idiosyncratic fate. Genesis offers no clue as to her motivation for looking back, which is where our two poems come in, both imaginatively putting us as readers into the experience of Lot's Wife. I will discuss them in the order in which they were written, the first by the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova from 1924 and the second by the Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska from 1975.

Akhmatova: *Pravednik* and Anguish

Akhmatova's poem is short, four stanzas of four lines each.[1] It opens with Lot, not named but identified as "the righteous man" following God's messenger away from the doomed city. Then "anguish spoke" to his wife and the second stanza is the voice of anguish telling her she can still look at the city she is leaving, with its memories, its imprint on her past and her identity. The third stanza describes what happens to her when she does look back; intense pain, then immobility. The last stanza, in the voice of the poet, asks "Who will weep for this woman? / Isn't her death the least significant?" and answers in the first person that "my heart will never forget."

There are three calls going on in the poem. It is in the form of a call and response, though the expected order is reversed. In the final stanza, Akhmatova asks, "Who will weep for this woman?" - a call she has already answered by writing the poem we are reading. The other two calls are first, the call that has happened before the poem starts, that of God's messenger to Lot

to flee the city and not look back, then, second, the call of anguish that forms part of the poem. The poem begins with Lot. As readers, we are joining a story already in progress, the first word is "And." Lot is in the process of following the divine call, delivered via the two angels. He knows what he is supposed to do because God gave him clear instructions. That is the first call. Then in line three, Akhmatova introduces another kind of call, of "anguish [that] spoke loudly to his wife." It is the contrast between these two kinds of call that provides hermeneutic generativity. For the first kind of call, I will use the Russian word in the poem for the phrase "righteous man" in the first line. In Russian it is a single word, *pravednik* which Hemschemeyer translated as "righteous man" (variant translations have the same or "just man"). I am using it for its defamiliarizing effect (if you are not a Russian speaker) and to allow it to take on multiple senses. Outside of its place in the poem itself, *pravednik* is used here not to denote a type of person, but as a vector for a certain type of call, that I will argue might appear in various guises, some of which appear in the world of nursing.

The call of the *pravednik* is unarguable. It has power and authority; it is righteous and it is right. How do we understand what we are supposed to do? Well, we do as we are told, we go where the *pravednik* tells us to go. The call of anguish, by contrast, is woefully subjective. It is felt before it is understood. It is affective, emotional. It is at the mercy of the senses, of the body, of memory - things you saw, things you did, people you loved. The call of anguish speaks through attachments, connections, and relationships. It arises from a rich, personal world of people and things, a lifeworld in phenomenological language. How does Lot's wife then understand that at this moment, she is supposed to look back, in spite of the fact that in doing so she is arguing with the unarguable, discounting righteousness, and courting annihilation? Understanding here is a felt understanding, an inner call, that is fully present in an embodied, temporal sense of self that is part of a world, bound to it. The *pravednik* obeys the order not to look back, because the *pravednik* is following another kind of call that is transcendent, self-sufficient, and not entangled in the world.

Nurses, I suggest, are being called constantly both by *pravedniks* and by anguish. Most of the time the call of the *pravednik* is heard through institutional abstractions such as policies, contracts, or legislation: all those instruments that tell us unequivocally what we are supposed to do or not supposed to do. Here is my reason for using the unfamiliar word because the call of the *pravednik* appears in so many guises, as externalized abstract forces and internalized as a disposition or inclination within people. Where it may be embodied in the figure of a righteous man (or woman), in modern life they are likely to be someone channelling institutional authority through status and prestige. The call of anguish on the other hand, arises out of enmeshment in the world, of a concrete and contingent situation of unique, embodied appeal. (The actual content of course may not be anguish as such, defined as *severe bodily or mental pain*, but since one of its Latin root means *narrow, tight* (Shorter Oxford Dictionary, 1993), perhaps we could think of being in a tight spot, being constrained, and needing help to open out).

In Genesis, and in the poem, it is one or the other - *pravednik* or anguish, and to choose the latter is the end. However, when it comes to nursing, there is not the same finality. Although the two kinds of call can be differentiated, in practice they emerge together and are both taken up, in interchange with each other. Nurses do know what they are supposed to do because nursing is a regulated profession that has precisely defined legal limits and permissions, and because they are

bound by employment contracts and registration requirements. Policies tell them how to carry out procedures properly, software programs (the *pravednik* in the machine, so to speak) tell them what to measure and record, what medications to give when, and so on. There is no path of nursing as a socially sanctioned professional activity other than following the *pravednik*. At the same time, nursing cannot be abstracted and reduced to the sum of its network of rules and regulations, it always inescapably occurs in the lifeworld, in a flesh and blood, felt, spoken, embodied, and enacted mesh of moments that manifests between particular people in particular places. All of this is in the second verse of the poem, where the call of anguish is deeply personal and deeply meaningful for Lot's wife. I do not think these are experienced as two separate calls in reality, but as an embodied response that includes cognitive and affective mobilization.

Returning to the poem, however, there is no doubt where the power lies, and the pathos of the final stanza lies in the fact that Akhmatova places herself on the side of the powerless, "the least significant." Although I argue for a dialogue between the two calls that does not happen in the poem, it does not mean that it is a dialogue on equal terms or that power is not still in play. There are consequences and disincentives to the backward glance, and advantages to sticking with the *pravednik*. Going back to the nursing context, this is evident in the reach of managerial regulation in hospitals, or in the prestige of quantitative research in academia. Looking back simply makes no sense to the *pravednik* of scientific progress, when evidence over five years old is worthless, and all that matters are outcomes, which lie in the future, and improved outcomes which lie further in the future. Nursing is a directed, purposeful activity, which does have to do with making things better, in the future, equipped with scientific knowledge of ways to do so, but nursing is at the same time a dialogue with the present – presenting - anguish, which comes from somewhere, somewhere behind us, in the past; nursing has to look back, heeding the call of anguish.

Szymborska: A Cacophony of Calls

I am now going to turn to the second poem entitled "Lot's Wife," by the Polish poet Wisława Szymborska, which offers up another angle from which to consider the call, and what we are supposed to do.[2] Szymborska also brings us what was going on for Lot's wife, she brings her alive, but unlike Akhmatova's version, there is no simple alternative call to that of obedience, to God and to husband. Instead, Szymborska slyly presents a raft of possible reasons for the look back: "carelessly, while tying my sandal strap…from the disobedience of the meek…the futility of wandering…in shame…in anger…" They vary from the tragic, of despair and weariness, to the defiant - she spells out the self-righteousness that so often accompanies righteousness - from the vengeful to the merely accidental. She leaves us with an ambiguous ending, "It's not inconceivable…", "It's possible…" None of the reasons she proposes in the poem are inconceivable, they are all very human, in many cases to the point of being humdrum. Much nursing practice is like this, we naturally recall moments when anguish calls, acute suffering, but often what call us to do the next thing is unremarkable.

In Szymborska's poem the locus of the call is different. For Akhmatova, anguish speaks, it calls, and she shows us how Lot's wife responded. Does anguish call from within Lot's wife? Presumably, but Akhmatova externalizes the call. In Szymborska's poem we have direct access to the first-person and everything takes place in the moment before Lot's wife is turned to a

pillar of salt. Quite where she is speaking from is anyone's guess, but what she reports is a whole series of inner calls. It becomes more explicit that the call of anguish (and this is now very unsteadily standing in for a whole carnival of motivations) is moving from inside to out, unlike the call of the *pravednik* that comes unequivocally from without. If the call of anguish is emotional, the linguistic root of emotion is the Latin *emovere*, to move out (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). Szymborska gives us the manifold of inner call but in response to external events. Outward call is turned around into a response that is also a call from within. Call is "modified in the guts of the living" in Auden's phrase (Auden, 1940/1991, p. 247). We know what we are supposed to do when the call is not only heard, but digested and re-called as inner decision.

But if Akhmatova's version of Lot's wife gives us two contrasting calls, either of which we can take as telling us what we are supposed to do, Szymborska's version states the dilemma a bit differently. She shows us all kinds of things that might call out to us, some principled, some emotional, some trivial, some accidental but at the end of the poem we are not really any the wiser as to which call Lot's wife responded to, nor are we any closer to working out what we are supposed to do. The message might be something like this; you are going to have all kinds of things coming at you, enjoining a response, and yet which one, or which ones you respond to and how, well, that you are going to have to decide when the time comes. We are back to square one. We need criteria, but in the light of everything Szymborska has shown us, just following the back of the self-righteous husband's neck seems like a poor option and an easy surrender of the difficulty of having to choose. Szymborska's call is anguish + x, where x is actually x,y, z and beyond. We have to exercise discernment but as soon as we do that, we invoke some kind of measure of rightness, of judgment about what we are supposed to do. Re-enter the *pravednik*, but now we are going to take its righteous voice into account, not merely follow it unquestioningly. Szymborska's poem does not have the moral clarity of Akhmatova's. It does not set out the problem so clearly, the problem of the bipolar pull between *pravednik* and anguish, but it is more acute in its depiction of actual decisional polyvalence[3].

How Do We Understand What We are Supposed to Do?

As a nurse, deciding to heed either the unipolar call of the *pravednik* or of anguish is a mistake. I am not sure one even could since it is always a question of the mixture between the two. Too much *pravednik* may lead to forms of bureaucratic or scientific alienation, depending on the context. On the other hand, too much anguish can lapse into antinomianism, when someone claims to be a self-dependent fount of compassion, which will result either in entropy, because the calls of anguish are too many and too relentless to be able to do anything at all, or to becoming yet another kind of *pravednik.* Paradoxically, in terms of the antinomy I have been presenting, it is possible to become a *pravednik* for anguish, to insist upon the primacy of one's own feeling of justice or compassion at the expense of others, to allow anguish to set into moralism. For example, when I see in the nursing literature that "compassion is the essence of nursing," I hear the call of *pravednik* speaking, because it is a singular moral claim, it brooks no alternative, no backward glances.

If Akhmatova's poem lends us the thought of *pravednik* and anguish, as elements themselves in exchange with each other, as ingredients of the call, then Szymborska's suggests the fragmented,

multiple, constant arising of calls in practice. These may be proximal or distant, urgent or mild, obvious or subtle, but they are of the stuff of nursing practice, calling constantly to the next action. In my analysis, there is one part of the story I have rather obviously ignored - the pillar of salt. In Akhmatova's poem it is the dramatic hinge, in Szymborska's it never quite happens but we know it is about to. For my purposes, it doesn't fit - there is no sudden end, no stasis. I have not been considering the call as it is in the story as a biographical singular moment, but as a structure of call and response that keeps on happening. Nurses are in the moment of decision which is repeated but differently each time.

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[1] I have not given the whole poem due to copyright restrictions. All quotations are from Judith Hemschemeyer's translation (Akhmatova, 1994, pp. 273-4). You can find the whole poem online, in a translation by Stanley Kunitz and Max Hayward at https://poets.org/poem/lots-wife (see references).

[2] Here again, I have not given the whole text. I have used the translation by Clare Cavanagh and Stanisław Barańczak (Szymborska, 2016, pp. 203-4). You can find this version online at: https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/lot-s-wife-2/ (see references).

[3] The contrast is partly explicable by when they were written. Akhmatova was writing in the immediate aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution and civil war. Looking back to what had been lost in the revolution could already be deadly. Her husband Nikolai Gumilev was executed by the Bolsheviks on trumped up charges of conspiracy in 1921. Symborska wrote her poem in 1970s Poland, where Communist rule had been locked in for thirty years. The stakes were not as high, but people had learned strategies of day-to-day accommodation under an oppressive state, what to say or not to say, what to do or not to do.