

Discussion Plan:
Auden, “Musée des Beaux Arts”
Breughel, “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus”

“And everything went on as usual...”: The Paradoxes of Suffering

Introduction: A key question throughout the discussion is “*Where do we stand?*” This poem and painting involve us. It’s merely “academic” if we stand outside; Auden and Breughel give us the opportunity to be there—but where? It’s just another image in a frame, or ink on a page, unless we ENTER.

Opening Exercise (5 min.) to be done in pairs: Turn to the painting—What *small detail* that you can point to in the painting—a figure, a color, aspect of the composition—that was alive for you? *We’ll call these “pulse points”*—What stirred you, startled you, bothered you, made you wonder, or question? Tell your partner about that. Something small and concrete—When we’re done, we’ll quickly list some of these on the board and use them as synapses for our discussion.

Group Discussion:

Read Auden, “Musée” aloud. Big questions:

- What makes people ‘turn away’ from suffering? Is there ever value in “turning away” from suffering? When? Why?
- What are the contexts in which suffering is noticed? And “turned toward”?
- How do we turn away from our own suffering and loss? What helps us face it?
- How does reading these pieces challenge, affirm, expand, disturb, or otherwise change your understanding of suffering?

Look at Brueghel, “Landscape” . . . and ask for “pulse points.”

- Think about the title, “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus.” What place does the boy occupy in the title and the painting?
- Who is turned toward him? Away from him?
- Where do *we* stand in the picture?
- With whom do we identify? And not? Why? Where does the artist lead our eye? How?

Questions of Implication:

What is the “human position” of suffering, from your experience in hospice work? In what ways does the painting look like, feel like your experience with suffering?

*This discussion plan was created by Emily Archer for a civic reflection series with hospice workers in New England and is shared with her permission.