

HOW SHALL WE NOT LIVE IN VAIN?

Woody P

*“If I can stop one heart from breaking”
by Emily Dickinson*

*If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain.*

This short poem was written by 19th-century American poet Emily Dickinson, who wrote ingenious poems without due opportunities to publish them for most of her life. However, her self-seclusion and simple way of living were among the reasons why she wrote such wisdom-bearing poems as “If I can stop one heart from breaking.”

“What gives my life meaning?” Probably everybody asks herself this question at some point in her life. We read and hear many ambitious historical figures’ aspiring biographies about achieving lofty personal ideals. Such success stories are double-edge swords which inspire and uplift the spirit on the one hand but encourage pressure on the other. Opposite to such grandeur is what Dickinson’s poem hints at. She does not ask us to aim high or dream big, but rather she simply implies that we should help other people. Without even indicating that it is an obligation, a duty, or some kind of correctness, the poet merely says what she would like to do, that is, to help other people, in order not to live in vain.

“How shall we not live in vain?” We can do this, Dickinson says, by stopping “one heart from breaking,” easing “one life the aching,” cooling “one pain” and helping “one fainting robin.” By repeating the word “one,” the poet emphasizes that helping other people is easy and that we only need to help no more than one person. Everybody can do it anytime anywhere. It is simple but its benefit is so great that it makes our lives meaningful. By helping others, we are actually helping ourselves. The conditional sentences the poet uses to express her thoughts suggest, although helping others is simple, we still need to make an actual effort!

Contrary to the distance felt in reading famous historical figures’ biographies, Dickinson’s poem is, on the whole approachable. The poem sounds like a friendly, even intimate, conversation. This affable tone aptly conveys the universal wisdom in the poem. It not only speaks to the readers of its immediate surroundings but also rings true in other cultures in the world, because everybody asks himself: “What is the meaning of my life?” Dickinson’s poem implicitly answers this philosophical question that concerns everybody.

You might ask: “Shouldn’t such an important question be asked in a grandiose fashion?” What the poet does is opposite to such a stereotype. Instead, the poet draws our attention to a fainting robin. What do you do about it? Leaving him to die or helping him “unto his nest again”? They are equally easy. Then you might ask again: “Shouldn’t we be careful about avian influenza?” What the poem does is not to address specific problems in the real world, but rather it places us in a moral situation. Answering it yourself will lead to the growth of wisdom.