I’m Nobody! Who Are You?

Barbara Mossberg

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*Today, Dec. 10, would have been Emily Dickinson's 181st birthday.*

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you-Nobody-too?
Then there's a Pair of us?
Don't tell-they'd advertise -you know!
How dreary to be Somebody!
How public-like a frog-
To tell one's name the Livelong June
To an admiring-Bog!

-- Emily Dickinson, "I'm Nobody! Who Are You?," from "Poems: Series 2," first published in 1891

Almost 25 years ago, I was serving as U.S. Scholar in Residence for the United States Information Agency, and lecturing worldwide on American culture and literature. I had flown from Washington, D.C., to San Francisco, to Taiwan (there were headwinds and we were running out of gas), to Bangkok, where there were monsoons, and more people died from snakes fleeing rising waters than from drowning, then to Jakarta, where I was deployed to Jogjakarta, while my ticket was taken from my hands, and I was taken -- being identified as a "soft target" -- on a diversionary route to the embassy, to get a new ticket and then, by the way, malaria treatment, and finally to Jogjakarta.

Dazed by the journey, disoriented from a flight with a crate of chickens next to me and no one seated at take-off or landing (the airline is no longer in business), I stumbled out of the plane. Dizzy after flying for two -- or was it three? -- days, in my white linen blouse and navy blue suit and black pumps (as we called them then), my eye noticed a bobbing hand-lettered sign:

I'm Nobody! Who are you?

A man in shorts and a pith helmet stepped forward and said, Dr. Mossberg? It turns out the international community in Indonesia heard that an Emily Dickinson scholar was coming to town, and they all were excited. They love Emily Dickinson. He had come to intercept me at the airport to welcome me by showing me the temple of Borobudur (that is another story). But it seems that everywhere in the world I have gone, Dickinson is famous for writing "I'm nobody."

It seems like a paradox, Emily Dickinson as a famous Nobody.

Dickinson famously lived her life in seclusion, if not exile. She wrote, ". . . I do not cross my father's ground to any House or town." The story goes that when ill her doctor had to stand in the doorway, observing her, fully clothed, across the room. Friends had to talk to her through a door left ajar. Someone else addressed her envelopes. She did not engage the world -- in person. She lived a quiet, invisible life. In her lifetime she was virtually unknown as a poet. She knew she was considered a "nobody" and she defiantly took on that identity with pride and panache. "How dreary to be Somebody." "Public" was literally a dirty word to her--a bog. Yet she yearned to be famous, to be immortal, to matter utterly to us, to be "great, Someday," as a poet. Her poetry chronicles her struggle for an identity of distinction. I think of "They shut me up in Prose/As when a little Girl/they put me in the Closet/because they liked me still."

In my work as a teacher and lecturer, I ask people to engage with the structure of the Nobody poem to open up their own sense of longing to belong and to be known in significant ways to our world. I begin my First Year Seminar at California State University in Monterey, with first-generation college students, students from under-served communities, students from families of migrant workers, seemingly a constituency far removed from the Harvard/Amherst/Holyoke nexus of the Dickinson family (college founders and trustees and Congressmen, denizens of Main Street, with every privilege) -- with Emily Dickinson's poem, "I'm Nobody."

I enter the room speaking the poem, and then ask people to write who they are, how they would identify themselves. We talk about Emily Dickinson, and they write me letters. Students find inspiration in Dickinson, affirming their somebodiness." "I am not a nobody. I am a somebody. My voice has power and emphasis... We are all somebody, we all have rights and we all need to fight for our freedom."

My students have written: "I really like Emily Dickinson. I feel like I can connect with her. Although she lived a life confined in a small room, she was still able to pursue her passion in writing... I see why she spent so much time jotting down her poems in her journals. 'I am Nobody' leaves the reader with hope because everybody is nobody, so why can't nobody be a somebody?"

And yet they also write: "When I first heard this saying, I honestly had no idea what it meant. However, I have learned that the term "nobody" is not a bad way to describe yourself. Being considered a nobody, gives you so much room to define who you are as a person."

Another student wrote: "Emily Dickinson proved that if you are a nobody and do not do anything about it then that statement is true. But if you do something, even if nobody finds out about it until you die, you become somebody. Right now it feels like I am a nobody because I am just a college student, but someday I will be a somebody."

The miracle for me, of Dickinson's life achievement of her poetry, is that despite her own lack of a public opportunity to express her voice, her power, and her genius (a topic that gnawed at her), and despite her loneliness, and ill health, she expressed a brave and indomitable vision both tragic and comic that inspires people of all ages, everywhere. I suspect her fame as a nobody illuminates a truth about all of us -- everyone. We each may harbor a conviction that we are a nobody, insignificant, invisible, in terms of our true worth. No one knows us for our true selves, our greatness, our genius. We each yearn to matter utterly.

I see the impact of Dickinson on my students' sense of possibility and mandate to speak their truths.

I reflect on the influence of Dickinson on the way I think about the world and the actual language with which my brain conceives thoughts and perceptions about my day and life. I wake up and see the sky and think, "I'll tell you how the sun rose/a ribbon at a time."

Barbara Mossberg is a director and professor at California State University in Monterey Bay. She is working on a book titled The Butterfly and the Glacier: The Power Of 'Nobody' To Change the World.

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