3:55am, churning with **Vincent van Gogh** & an encounter I had on him with eminent art critic Gershon Weisenberg in the question period after his lecture, "Passionate Visions: The Life and Artistry of Vincent van Gogh"

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1 When recently I sold/gave 1/3rd of my library, I could not divest myself of the catalogs of the "Vincent" exhibits I've experienced: he's the draftsman/painter most resonant in my inner life. My paintings, poor though they be, are more influenced by him than by any other painter. Like him, in my early years I was a passionate reader of the Bible & a distributor of gospel tracts (for which he was dismissed from art school). Like him, I went to divinity school (though unlike him, I finished: he quit, discouraged over the requirement that he master Latin & Greek). Like him, I was a pastor (though unlike him, I stayed with it for more than a decade: the church authorities dismissed him for over-identifying with his people [in Franciscan-like poverty, including sleeping on the bare floor]).

2 At age 27, Vincent became convinced that his vocation was to draw & paint his **visions** of dignity within misery, beauty beyond but through & in ugliness, compassion in & for the last & the least, glory in & through nature--all with unalloyed simplicity & unsentimental honesty. Dead a mere decade later (1890), he left 800 drawings & 800 paintings....(The quoted material here is from the lecture:) Vincent was "gospel-oriented" toward the poor, whose "ravaged dignity" as "people without a safety net" left them feeling that "there is no just and loving God to take them through their lives." In his portraiture of self & others, he strove to "capture the common human denomination" in "close encounters with the self." (A few days ago, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts closed the most extensive exhibit ever anywhere of his portraits: "Van Gogh: Face-to-Face.") Always, no matter what others thought of him & his work, he upheld "the integrity of moral & pictorial conviction."

3 Now for my **interchange** with the lecturer:
I: "I studied under the philosopher who defined God as 'the increase of appreciative awareness.' Everybody's awareness increases, but the issue is whether the soul continually says 'yes--yes--yes' as awareness expands. You, as Vincent did before you, have met the test: your elegantly expressed lecture revealed this 'yes.' You & Vincent are brothers. In light of that philospher's remark, I have two questions for you: (1) *Who is God for you?* (2) *What is your religion?*"
He: "As to your 2nd question--I don't like to talk about my religion, but I'm Jewish. A number of my relatives were killed in the Holocaust. As to your 1st question, I haven't much thought about it." (Long pause.) "I came here to speak about, & show slides of the works of, Van Gogh, not about God & myself. I am greatly concerned, however, about the good, as Van Gogh was." (About a certain portrait, the lecturer said "It's a good soul looking at a good soul.") "One might say that in Van Gogh's life & work, nature almost came to replace God."
I: "Or one may say, as I do, that Van Gogh's lifelong question was 'Who is God for me?'"
He: "Yes, that is possible." (Long pause.) "Now that you've got me thinking about God & Van Gogh, there are three of his paintings that seem to me especially germane." (I have been in the presence of, & have color reproductions of, the three. But before looking at them, let's look at what I was up to as I began the interchange. I'll express it in a poem:)

When I look at a person through a window,
all I care about the window is that it's pane be
clear.
When I look at a person through a person,
I care about **two** persons.

When I open my Vincent books, I look at Vincent. But yesterday, I saw both the lecturer & Vincent, whom he paeaned through his own person. (Beecher's definition of preaching: "the communication of truth through personality.") I was--quite properly &, I believe, Christianly--concerned about how the lecturer personally opens on God, whom I see Vincent's life & work as opening on. Because (at least largely) of unplesant & destructive religious strife in the past, Americans have an unfortunate taboo against going public about what matters most, viz., the center (if any): the Center is "too private" to talk about. Evangelism requires the breaching of this taboo.

Now to those three God/Vincent paintings:

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--At this point, I read my copy of the Summer/00 CHRISTIANITY AND THE ARTS, which features Vincent. Four articles on him, "essentially excerpts from" Kathleen Erickson's AT ETERNITY'S GATE: The Spiritual Vision of Vincent van Gogh (Eerdmans/98; she's an art historian with a U. of Chicago PhD in the history of Christianity, & travels extensively giving slide lectures on Vincent, with special interest in the controversy over the role of spirituality in his life and work). After his evangelical conversion at age 22, he became a Bible teacher & "assistant preacher" in England, then "a missionary to the coal miners" (96-hour work-week!) in Belgium. No support from the clergy, whose hypocrisy (he said) led him to give up on the church & find his fulltime vocation (without remuneration) in drawing & painting.

Bible, Zola's "Joie de Vivre," & unlit candle

As I write I am looking at a color reproduction of this painting (as in the case of the following two paintings). Here there are layers of more than paint! A light beyond ours (the candle is unlit) shines on both the well-worn Bible (open to Isaiah 53, which is for V. the suffering love of God in Christ, whose identification with sufferers we are to imitate (as in V.'s favorite devotional book, a Kempis' IMITATIO CHRISTI). And also well-worn is Zola's song to this-worldly joy, of which V. knew little (as a child, he did not experience warm parental love; his one proposal of marriage was coldly rejected; & his efforts to find a living companion were all short-lived). But his voluminous correspondence has many references to moments of joy in nature (esp. twilight & evening;* many critics consider his "Starry Night" his most spiritual painting), while painting, & [once that I know of] during preaching [only one of his sermons has survived]). But, V. was convinced, God intends joy through & beyond (in the painting, in front of) suffering, though it's fully realizable only in the afterlife.
* "When all sound ceases, God's voice is heard under the stars."--Letters 1:124, 1877. Three letters later, this: Moon, sun, stars together "speak of the love of God, and make one think of the words [of Jesus]: "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.'" Fifteen letters later, a torrent of quotations from Jesus during an experience of twilight, including "I am the resurrection and the life." The letters prove wrong those who say that V., in his last years, turned from the Christian gospel to nature-worship. Being of the same (monotheistic) source, nature & the gospel should evoke the same worship.

Pietá

This Mother Mary & the dead Jesus was painted in 1889, the year before the last year of V.'s life as he sensed the nearing of the end. (The end came when his patron, his only source of income, wrote that he was unable to continue financial support. IRONY: If a V. painting came on the market today, $10 million couldn't touch it.)....What are we to make of the contrast between this pietá (the corpse out of Mary's arms & hands) & the traditional iconograph (the corpse in Mary's lap)? Perhaps it's V.'s lifelong feeling of being unloved (Jesus has V.'s reddish hair). The lecturer here spoke of the loss of (Jewish) relatives of his in the Holocaust, then of "the righteous gentiles" ("not all of them Christians") who rescued Jews from Hitler: "the mystery of goodness," he well called it as counterpoise to the familiar mystery of evil. ....Here is a Kempis' IMITATIO in paint: suffering with Jesus (taking up one's cross) but with anticipation of joyous victory in the yellow of sky & Christ's clothing: "The morning light portends Christ's resurrection and ultimate triumph as well as the regeneration van Gogh hoped to find for himself through the healing of the [mental] asylum at St. Remy [into which he had committed himself]."--K.E., CHRISTIANITY AND THE ARTS, 16; "Her arms present the [Corpus] figure with expectation rather than enfold him in grief" (or, I add, show lack of human warmth)....Yellow: The previous year, V. painted his series of sunflowers, symbols of the sun, symbol of God's love & of hope for healing & redemption.

Jesus raising Lazarus (1890, Vincent's last year)

Again, Jesus has V.'s reddish hair: not that he saw himself as savior, but rather the Savior as saving him through the Savior's redemptive suffering & the imitator's obedient suffering. And again, yellow: yellow sun & sky behind Jesus, yellow on & around Lazarus ("life," said the lecturer; & [I add] divinity: V. in his letters often quoted Jesus' "I am the light of the world"). Jesus' green garment also says life....In letter W14, V. says "I read books to find the artist who wrote them." So he read the Bible, humanity, & the world--to find the Artist....Yeats despaired about the "passionate intensity" of evil in the world, but V.'s "p.i." was for the good, the noble, the presence of dignity where the world does not see it. His last letter expresses the hope that his works, always pursuant of "the essentials," would "retain their calm, even in the catastrophe." They have, thanks be to God.

Passionate Visions:

The Life and Artistry of Vincent van Gogh

with

Gershon Weisenberg

The life and artistry of Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) are wreathed in the myth and misunderstanding sensationalism invariably creates. Those who love this passionate Dutchman's glorious achievement know the truth: that the intensity and rich complexity of his work were matched only by painstaking effort, dedicated craft, and a transcendent vision of the spiritual possibilities of art. We will explore the dazzling colors, dramatic textures, and memorable images of his all-too-short life-work in this lecture and slide presentation.

Gershon Weisenberg was raised in Hamilton, Ontario and New York City. He attended Clark University and Harvard University, where he studied Languages, Literature, and Art History. He has taught and lectured at the Worcester Art Museum, the Boston, Brookline, Cambridge, Concord-Carlisle and Newton Centers for Adult Education, and many churches, synagogues and retirement communities.

Between 1979 and 1994, Mr. Weisenberg was regional director of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, Worcester County Chapter. During a prior academic career, he also taught at Harvard University, SUNY Buffalo, Salem State College, Northeastern University, and the Teachers College at Aalborg, Denmark. The past five years have been spent lecturing extensively on art, 1930s and 1940s European history, and literary subjects. Mr. Weisenberg is currently working on a scholarly book about the Spanish Civil War.