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Did Shakespeare get it wrong? Is life's basic question "to smile or not to smile," rather than "to be or not to be"?

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French Jesuit, scientist, paleontologist, philosopher and theologian, had a zest for living. He loved this world, calling it a "[divine milieu](#)." He attempted to see deeply the abiding presence of God's Spirit in all things and, in the process, he encouraged people to smile. He wrote: "It is absolutely necessary to keep smiling. The essential, and doubtless most fruitful, gesture is to smile, with something of love in the smile." The alternative was unacceptable to him, for it short-circuited the élan and joy of living.

Another Jesuit, Pope Francis, consistently encourages us to encounter and accompany one another on this journey of life. Part of the encounter is to offer a hospitable smile. As the pope journeys from country to country, his radiant face says "Welcome, I am with you on this long journey called life. Let us travel together, hold hands and live life to the fullest." A non-Jesuit named Jesus came to give us life to the full.

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Recently, The New York Times columnist David Brooks wrote a challenging and insightful piece entitled, "[How to Save a Sad, Lonely, Angry and Mean Society](#)." The very title of the article captures what many people are experiencing today — sadness and loneliness (our national disease), rage and cruelty.

With an O. Henry surprise ending to the article, Brooks writes about one of his heroes: [Samuel Johnson](#), of all persons, the dictionary compiler, poet and critic. Johnson's early life was difficult but gradually he matured and became a generous man. He sheltered outcasts and lived the Gospel with the fullness of life, a zest for living and, surely, a smile on his face.

Then we have Mother Teresa of Calcutta. We know the story of her working with the poorest of the poor. But not until her private writings were published did many know that she suffered from a [deep sadness and many dark nights of the soul](#). Yet her constant admonition to her sisters in community was to smile: "Take whatever He gives and give whatever He takes with a big smile." She also said, "If you don't go to the people with a cheerful face, you only increase their darkness and their miseries and their sorrows." Mother Teresa would surely agree with Chardin that the smile given must have some love in it.

Some poets, too, join Chardin, Pope Francis and Mother Teresa in promoting the smile. Dorothy Donnelly begins her poem "Smiled At" with: "The smile's one syllable sign says you're seen, / so you know you're there." Interestingly, below the title of her poem "Smiled At," Donnelly quoted the famous Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein who expressed a wish: "What I'd like would be someone to smile at me occasionally." Is that not our wish, too?



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To not be seen, really seen, by our fellow humans is to live in the dark. Maybe Emily Dickinson had that experience and spoke about it when she cried out: "[I'm Nobody!](#) [Who are You?](#)" Being ignored is worse than a slap on the face.

More poets are part of the smile club. In "The Divine Comedy," Dante says of Beatrice: "The radiant smile with which she spoke to me / would gladden even one burning at the stake." I'm not quite sure if a smile is that powerful. But good old Dante was smitten by a smile.

George Herbert in his poem "[Love III](#)" tells of how God took him by the hand and "smiling did reply / who made the eyes but I." John of the Cross would confirm this: "When God looks, God loves." Good news, here.

We hear about the smile even from the animal world. Ruth Pitter's poem "By a Plain But Amiable Cat" has the cat utter: "See what a charming smile I bring." What brings about the cat's smile is the recognition that she realizes that she exists (unlike dogs that don't reflect on "being"). Would that all of us in the human world could smile at the basic fact that we exist, and that the gift of life is precious. Yet, if love is not experienced, that precious gift may never lead to the art of smiling (with love).

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We must not forget about the novelists. In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte has a few words to say about the smile: "but the smile expired" and "coin one of your wild, shy, provoking smiles." Those who have developed the art of smiling realize that a loving smile can expire, or can be provocative and wild, or can even be seductively shy. So, recipients of a smile beware.

Like Baskin-Robbins ice cream, smiles come in many flavors. The novelist and screenwriter Raymond Chandler, in his 1953 *The Long Goodbye*, got somewhat carried away by the facial expression known as the smile: "the distant smile / a cool smile / a hesitant little smile / that plastic smile / a bleak smile / a sour smile / a slow smile / the small smile" and the list goes on.

A final word and warning about the art of smiling. Deception! An art critic said about "Mona Lisa" that though she had a mysterious smile to the nth degree, it was a half-smile. The critic went on to say that Mona Lisa's eyes were not smiling. Teilhard de Chardin would disqualify her smile. It didn't have love in it.