

## **Starry night**

Last night, I had a truly beautiful dream: I was at a national conference of the Young Buddhist Association of Malaysia, of which I was a co-founder (1970). Delegates were coming in from all over. Everyone was excited to see each other again, and to share their thoughts and feelings about their common love, the Dharma, that have brought them together.

Then, I suddenly felt a sense of profound peace, as if everyone had stopped talking and there was this beautiful silence. Something moved me to look up at the open sky, and I announced to those around me to look up above, too.

There, in the boundless embrace of a dark vast cloudless moonless space were countless bright twinkling stars. For a while, this timeless cavern of bright darkness embraced all of us. All of a sudden, the stars appeared to dance around in circles everywhere in the canvas of the heavens. They danced in whorls of myriad hues, like brilliant whirlpool galaxies. It at once reminded me of the Dutch Post-Impressionist Vincent Van Gogh's painting, "Starry Night Over the Rhone" (1888), and the better known, "The Starry Night" (1889).

Although Van Gogh had an interest in art since young, he started life with a greater vocation – evangelism. He was born on 30 March 1853, in Groot-Zundert, near Breda, Netherlands, as Vincent Willem van Gogh (1853-1890), the eldest surviving son of a Calvinist<sup>1</sup> pastor Theodorus van Gogh and his wife, Anna Cornelia Carbentus. Of his five brothers, Vincent was closest to his brother, Theo, with whom he often corresponded for 18 years. Vincent was a prolific letter writer, and we learn much of his life and personality from them.<sup>2</sup>

His early interest in art was not painting it, but selling it in the Hague. At 15, he became a dealer's assistant with Goupil and Co at a branch run by one of his uncles. In 1873, his employers transferred him to the London branch, but there he was distracted by religious fervour, inspired by the evangelism movement sweeping England.

He was then transferred to Paris, where he took to preaching to annoyed customers rather than selling them art. In March 1876, he was fired. With unseemly delight at his new freedom, he returned to England to undertake mission work. When he visited his parents in the Netherlands, they insisted that he joined divinity school, for which he must have some command of higher Latin and Greek.

Vincent rebelled. What did dead languages have to do with serving the poor? The family enrolled him in an evangelical academy, but after a few months, the faculty declared his explosive temper unsuitable for a missionary. Vincent set off to be a missionary anyway.

Moving to a desperately poor coal-mining community, he lived like the miners to whom he preached, eating scraps and dressing in rags. Without the little money Theo sent to him, he would have starved. Although barely aware of it himself, Vincent's passions began to shift during the two years spent with the miners. He developed a distaste for organized religion, which did little to help the poorest of the poor.<sup>3</sup> He also began drawing compulsively and spent hours copying prints sent by Theo.

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<sup>1</sup> A follower of John Calvin (1509-1564), influential French theologian and pastor during the Protestant Reformation (regarded by some as its most prominent figure), well known for his controversial polemics and apologetics, known as Calvinism, one of the darkest shades of religion. See Reflection, "When self-love is good," R256, 2012: [link](#).

<sup>2</sup> [http://wybowiersma.net/pub/essays/Wiersma,Wybo,The\\_letters\\_by\\_Vincent\\_van\\_Gogh.pdf](http://wybowiersma.net/pub/essays/Wiersma,Wybo,The_letters_by_Vincent_van_Gogh.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> A similar story is that of Carl Rogers (1902-1987), one of the founders of the humanistic (or client-centred) approach to psychotherapy. He came from a devout Pentecostal Christian family in the US. At age 20, following his 1922 trip to Beijing, China, for an international Christian conference, he started to doubt his religious convictions. To help him clarify his career choice, he attended a seminar on *Why am I entering the Ministry?*, after which he was sure he wanted a career change.

In 1880, when he was 27, in Cuesmes (near the village of Mons, Belgium), Vincent renounced religion and embraced a life of art.<sup>4</sup> It was only then that he first started to paint. During the two years living in Paris with his brother, Theo, who encouraged Vincent's artistic talents by introducing him to numerous artists.<sup>5</sup>

He met Paul Gauguin in 1887, but they both strongly disagreed on style. While Gauguin tended towards "abstractions"<sup>6</sup> or imaginative style (*de tête*, "in the head"),<sup>7</sup> Vincent preferred to paint from nature.<sup>8</sup> In December 1888, after a bad fight with Gauguin, Vincent, it is said, cut off the lower half of his left ear and, according to a local 4-page newspaper, *La Petit Journal*, went to the residence of Rachel, his favourite prostitute, with the words, "Take it, it will be useful to you!"<sup>9</sup>

He was later found unconscious at his home, and immediately hospitalized.<sup>10</sup> In 1889, he moved to a psychiatric institution in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, France, where he painted a total of 150 works. He was a prolific painter, often producing a work a day.

In a letter to Theo, written in June 1888 or in September 1889, Vincent mentions a "night study."<sup>11</sup> He compared the stars to dots on a map and mused that, as one takes a train to travel on earth, "we take death to reach a star."<sup>12</sup> Although at this point, Vincent was disillusioned by religion,<sup>13</sup> he appears to have held a belief in an afterlife. In a letter to Theo, after having painted *Starry Night Over the Rhone*, he speaks of a "tremendous need for, shall I say the word – of religion – so I go outside at night to paint the stars...."<sup>14</sup>

He wrote about existing in another dimension after death and associated this dimension with the night sky. "It would be so simple and would account so much for the terrible things in life, which now amaze and wound us so, if life had yet another hemisphere, invisible it is true, but where one lands when one dies."<sup>15</sup> "Hope is in the stars," he wrote.<sup>16</sup>

These starry swirls probably represent Vincent's understanding of the cosmos as a living, dynamic place.<sup>17</sup> Or, that the heavenly swirls could represent wind, evoking the mistral that had such a profound effect on Vincent during the 27 months he spent in Provence.<sup>18</sup> Thus, they evoke his spirituality and closeness with nature.

Ironically, in the letter to Bernard, Vincent admits that he has given up on abstraction (reflected in *The Starry Night*), and regards his masterpiece as a "failure."<sup>19</sup> Vincent is here referring to the

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<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Lunday, *Secret Lives of Great Artists*, 2008:148 f.

<sup>5</sup> Vincent's real artistic influences were by Constantijn Huysmans in Tilburg, Netherlands, who taught him the importance of making copies of other artists' works and of observing nature. Throughout his short career, Vincent did both.

<sup>6</sup> Naifeh & Smith, 2011:691.

<sup>7</sup> Naifeh & Smith, 2011:769.

<sup>8</sup> Naifeh & Smith, 2011:535, 716.

<sup>9</sup> [A recent theory](#) is that it was Gauguin who sliced off Vincent's ear with his sword in a quarrel with him over Rachel, but Vincent covered up the truth. His ear is still preserved in Paris, where it was exhibited in the 1930s.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Van-Goghs-own-words-after-cutting-his-ear-recorded-in-Paris-newspaper/30392>.

<sup>11</sup> "<http://www.vangoghletters.org/vg/>," *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters*, no 805.

<sup>12</sup> Letter from Arles to Theo, July 1888; Naifeh & Smith, Steven Naifeh & Gregory White Smith, *Van Gogh: The Life*, NY: Random House, 2011:697.

<sup>13</sup> Lauren Soth, "[Van Gogh's Agony](#)," *Art Bulletin* 68,2 June 1986:301. Naifeh & Smith, 2011:651.

<sup>14</sup> Letter 543: [http://www.vggallery.com/letters/669\\_V-T\\_543.pdf](http://www.vggallery.com/letters/669_V-T_543.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Letter 516 from Arles to Theo: <http://www.vangoghinteractive.com/headsofPeople/arles.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Naifeh & Smith, 2011:740 (also on his desire to paint "the starry sky.")

<sup>17</sup> Albert Boime, "Van Gogh's 'Starry Night': A History of Matter and a Matter of History," *Arts Magazine* Dec 1984:92.

<sup>18</sup> Charles A Whitney, "The Skies of Vincent van Gogh," *Art History* 9,3 1986:358.

<sup>19</sup> Ronald de Leeuw (ed), *The Letters of Vincent van Gogh*, London: Penguin Books. 1996:469.

expressionist swirls which dominate the upper center portion of *The Starry Night*.<sup>20</sup> He also thought that he had painted the stars too large!<sup>21</sup>

Naifeh and Smith identify<sup>22</sup> *The Starry Night* as suggesting temporal lobe epilepsy, or latent epilepsy, “a *mental* epilepsy—a seizing up of the mind: a collapse of thought, perception, reason, and emotion that manifested itself entirely in the brain and often prompted bizarre, dramatic behavior.” The symptoms “resembled fireworks of electrical impulses in the brain,”<sup>23</sup> like the starry whorls and starbursts in the painting.

Naifeh and Smith theorize that the seeds of Vincent’s seizures were present when Vincent painted *The Starry Night*, that “Vincent’s euphoric image of the swirling, unhinged cosmos signaled that his defenses had been breached.”<sup>24</sup> On that day in mid-June 1889, in a “state of heightened reality,” Vincent was absorbed into painting “a night sky unlike any other the world had ever seen with ordinary eyes.”<sup>25</sup>

In 1890, two years after the ear-cutting incident, Vincent walked into a field and shot himself in the chest with a revolver. He died two days later (27 July 1890) in Ravoux Inn, in the heart of Auvers-sur-Oise, a village 30 km north of Paris.<sup>26</sup> His last words, Theo (who rushed to his side) reported, were “The sadness will last forever” (*La tristesse durera toujours*).

Despite his difficult personality and tumultuous life, perhaps because of them,<sup>27</sup> he produced some of the greatest art works we know.<sup>28</sup> In his entire artistic life, he sold only one painting, *The Red Vineyard*, in 1890. Yet today all his art is widely acclaimed and highly prized.

One of the happy memories of my younger days was this moving song, “Vincent” (1971), sung by DonMcLean, who also wrote the lyrics, describing Vincent’s pains and paintings. The refrain goes like this:

Now I understand what you tried to say to me  
how you suffered for your sanity  
how you tried to set them free.  
They would not listen  
they did not know how  
perhaps they'll listen now.

But see and hear the closing verse. The Van Gogh Gallery has the song, and explains how the song compares to Van Gogh’s actual life.<sup>29</sup> Vincent reminds us to never stop listening to others, and of course to ourselves, like the early “listeners” (*sāvaka*) of the Buddha.

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<sup>20</sup> Naifeh & Smith, 2011:762.

<sup>21</sup> Naifeh & Smith, 2011:691.

<sup>22</sup> Following H Gastaut, 1956, himself confirming the diagnosis originally made by French doctors treating Vincent. D Blumer, “[The illness of Vincent Van Gogh](#),” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 159, 2002:519-526, esp 521. But see Naifeh & Smith, 2011:798-801.

<sup>23</sup> Naifeh & Smith 2011:852 f, 866.

<sup>24</sup> Naifeh & Smith 2011:867.

<sup>25</sup> Naifeh & Smith 2011:866. W N Arnold diagnoses his affliction as “acute intermittent porphyria”: *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences* 13,1 2004:22-43.

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.maisondevangogh.fr/>.

<sup>27</sup> See Reflection, “The artist’s suffering,” R280, 2013: [link](#).

<sup>28</sup> Jan Hulsker, *The Complete Van Gogh*. Oxford: Phaidon, 1980:380-382.

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.vangoghgallery.com/painting/starrynightlyrics.html>.