

Poetry as Prayer

How the beauty of poetry can lead us deeper into Mystery.



I've always loved poetry: the cadence, the metaphor, the symbolism. The impact of meter and rhythm and line pauses, and the way they invite me to breathe, drop me from head to heart, from heart to spirit. My breath slows, and, often, there is an internal shift, a deep Yes from the ground of my Being.

As I read the monthly reflections from contributors to this website, I'm struck by how many of us in this community of prayer look, perhaps unconsciously, to poetry, to express what's deepest in our hearts. Padraig O'Tuama describes poetry as

*'an audacious entry of ourselves into the text, in the hope that there might be something in there that can open us up to the possibility of discovering what it means to be alive... In a poem, there's a 'you' that's implied - in the hope that someone out there is listening. By entering audaciously into the texts, the texts begin to read you back. In a conversation between self and text, something begins to open up between the narrative and you. Something deeper - and that is sufficient to call it prayer.'*¹

The Bible is poetry. That's true of the Hebrew Bible in particular. The reason that matters...is that this was the text of Jesus. This was his scripture.²

¹Padraig O'Tuama: Poetry as Prayer https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3mp_2Smibiw

²Walter Brueggemann. onbeing.org Dec 20 2018

Poetry predates the written word, containing subtle and meaningful acoustic devices and rhythms that are tied to the meaning, which are much easier to pick up when the poem is heard or read out loud.³ Try a little experiment: read the following excerpt from Psalm 119 silently; then read it again, aloud, taking note of the rhythm, cadence and pauses for breath. For breath is synonymous with Spirit... Be aware of anything different that stirs within you, that opens up between the narrative and you - as poem becomes prayer...

*Beloved Silence,
Quiet centre of my soul,
caress our wandering minds and bind us to your desire for us.
Dilate our hearts. Soak into the ground of our being
like rain saturating dry soil.
May our hearts wait, open and receptive
to your drenching of our spirits in love.⁴*

People have always returned to these ancient scriptures for inspiration, and in times of lament, praise or consolation. 'Biblical literature is great world literature - there's an increase in poets taking biblical literature and re-forming it in an attempt to make sense of their own world'⁵ - inspiring and healing us, moving us beyond our minds to our deepest longings. When spoken or sung from this place; poetry, as prayer, informs our contemplation, inviting us to travel deeper into the compassionate heart of the Beloved.

*God is creating and ordering the universe,
but does not do it alone..⁶*

This reflection is dedicated to this praxis. Let us be pilgrims together, knitted and knotted and oned in seeking to heal this beautiful, fragile place we call Home. May we be drawn into poetry's embrace. May it feed our gratitude, longing, delight, grief; for 'poetry, like prayer, is that state of searching, a willingness to surrender to the unknown, to feeling through the dark.'⁷

*See, I am God.
See, I am in all things. See, I do all things.
See, I never take my hands
from my words,
and never shall without end.
Julian Of Norwich*

So we may see with fresh eyes, I have added some poems which may be new, some perennial favourites, and have grouped them into themes. I invite you to choose a poem which draws you into the Mystery of, and compassion for, our world, and use it throughout October as entryway into our daily contemplative practice. May we discover anew that:

³ <https://study.com/academy/lesson/the-importance-of-reading-poetry-aloud.html>

⁴ Nan C Merrill, *Psalms for Praying*, 2007

⁵ The Bible in Poetry <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5akjYjyQ78g>

⁶ Barbare Holmes in Richard Rohr, cac.org August 28 2020

⁷ <https://hyphenmagazine.com/blog/2019/10/poetry-prayer-and-praxis-emptiness>

*Poetry is a life-cherishing force.
For poems are not words after all,
But fires for the cold,
Ropes let down to the lost,
Something as necessary as bread
In the pockets of the hungry.⁸*

Longing...

I yearn to belong to something,
to be contained
in an all-embracing mind that sees me
as a single thing.
I yearn to be held
in the great hands of your heart -
oh let them take me now.
Into them I place these fragments,
my life,
and you, God - spend them
however you want.
Rilke, Book of Hours, 139



Reconcile yourself to wait in this darkness
as long as is necessary,
but still go on longing after God whom you love.
Strike that thick cloud of unknowing
with the sharp dart of longing love,
and on no account whatever,
think of giving up.
The Cloud of Unknowing



I did not have to ask my heart what it wanted,
because of all the desires I have ever known,
just one thing I cling to-
for it was the essence of all desire:
to know beauty.

St John of the Cross, (1542-1591)

⁸ Mary Oliver, A Poetry Handbook, Mariner Books, August 1994

Lament:



The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
*William Wordsworth, The World is too much with us. (1802)*⁹

I'll have an oil spill
on the rocks.
Earthshaking. Dirty.
I want the works.
Nitrous oxide, CO2,
give me rolling mist,
smoke, smog.
Polluted.
Can you fill it to the brim?
Raise the sea levels?
Spray it with acid to give it that
kick?
I want heat, flames
fuelled by fossil.
Complex notes. Bitter.
Rim the glass with coal,
garnish with palm,
and put it on my tab.
*Ella Duffy. 'On the Rocks' (2017)*¹⁰



⁹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45564/the-world-is-too-much-with-us>

¹⁰ this is the lament of our youth <https://ypn.poetrysociety.org.uk/workshop/melting-ice-poetry-challenge/>

Praise:

Glory be to God for dappled things –
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings...

*Gerard Many Hopkins, Pied Beauty (1877)*¹¹

Beloved, let us once more praise the rain.
Let us discover some new alphabet,
For this, the often praised...¹²
Conrad Potter Aiken 1889-1973

Make a joyful noise to the Beloved
all the earth;
break forth in grateful song
and sing praises!
...lift up your hearts with
gratitude and joy!
Let the voices of all people blend
in harmony,
in unison let the people
magnify the Beloved!
Nan C Merrill, Psalms for Praying Psalm, Ps. 98



¹¹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44399/pied-beauty>

¹² <https://mypoeticside.com/show-classic-poem-323>

Benediction:

Through the empty branches
the sky remains.
It is what you have.
Be earth now, and evensong.
Be the ground lying under that sky..
Be modest now, like a thing
ripened until it is real,
so that he who began it all
can feel you when
he reaches for you.

Rilke, Book of Hours, 135



Who will offer the dance of their own life
as a creation of devotion
and beauty?
Only those who have come through the darkness
and walk now in the light
can offer their lives in service
to build the new world, where justice and freedom
will truly flourish.

Nan C Merrill: ibid, Psalm 107,220



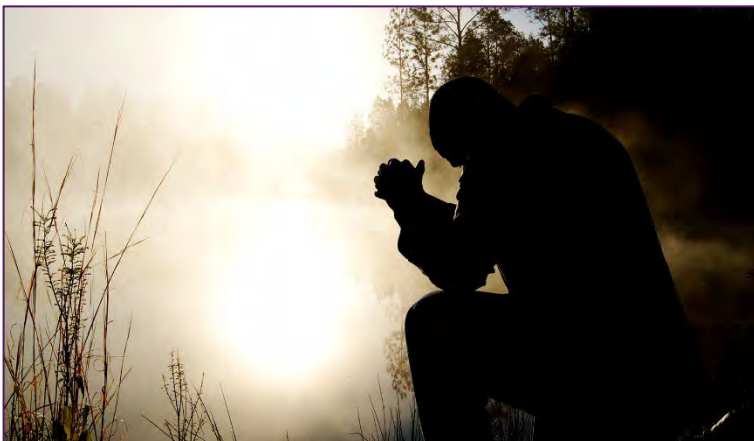
Consolation:

In suffering - there are two golden chalices:
suffering and praise.
Both are held in the hands of Christ.
The left is the red wine of suffering,
the right the white wine
of sublime consolation.
Mechtild of Magdeburg



It was easy to love God
in all that was beautiful.
The lessons of deep knowledge though,
instructed me
to embrace God in all things.
Francis of Assisi in Ladinsky - Love Poems from God

Let nothing disturb you,
Let nothing frighten you.
all things pass away:
God never changes,
Patience obtains all things.
He who has God finds he lacks nothing.
God alone suffices.
Teresa of Jesus, Bookmark Prayer



In contemplation
God teaches the soul
very quietly and secretly,
without its knowing how,
without the sound of words,
and without the help of
any bodily or spiritual faculty;
in silence and quietude,
in darkness to all
sensory and natural things.
St John of the Cross (SC39.12)

Creation:

All things are enclosed within the bubbling source of the living God –
Hildegard von Bingen: Divine Works

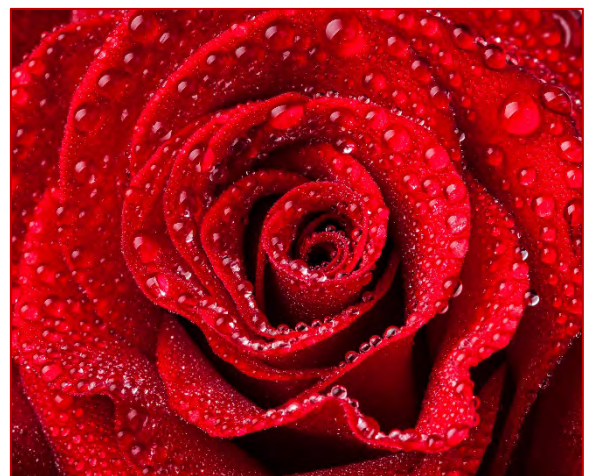


Love God's creation,
love every atom of it separately,
and love it also as a whole;
love every green leaf,
every ray of God's light;
love the animals and the plants and
love every inanimate object.
If you come to love all things,
you will perceive God's mystery
in all things.

Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov

There is no creature on earth in whom
God is absent...
The presence of God's spirit in all living
things is what makes them beautiful;
and if we look with God's eyes, nothing
on earth is ugly.
Letters of Pelagius¹³.

What they (men and women) are seeking
may be found in a single rose or a drop of water...
but the eyes are blind:
one must see with the heart.
Saint-Exupery: The little Prince (1943)



¹³ in Newell, Listening to the Heartbeat of God, 1997, 11

The above is but a soupçon of the poetry that can be used as prayer, inviting us, through contemplation, to contribute our own selves to reordering the universe in line with God's dream. May poetry continue to bless us as we journey together into what lies ahead, being open to rebuilding ourselves and the Universe; learning to fall, learning to fly, in solidarity with the compassionate heart of the Beloved.

**When you pray, be like the mountain
in stillness, in silence;
thoughts rooted in eternity.
Do nothing; just sit, just be;
and you will harvest the fruit of your prayer.**

St Seraphim of Sarov. (1759-1833)

***Christine Howard
September 2020***