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Why Poetry Is Necessary

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In the last few years I have spent much of my time writing books on poetry. Sometimes, while sitting alone in front of my computer, I have wondered whether I was wasting my time. After all, the world is in trouble. It has always been in trouble. Surely there must be something more useful, more pressing, to give my time to than reflecting on poetry?

But no; I wrote more books in my Ten Poems series, wondering all the while whether they and I were doing little more than making ourselves progressively irrelevant.

On my good days, I knew better, which is why I kept writing. I knew that great poetry has the power to start a fire in a person's life. It can alter the way we see ourselves. It can change the way we see the world. You may never have read a poem in your life, and yet you can pick up a volume of Mary Oliver say, or Neruda, or of Rumi, open it to any page, and suddenly find yourself blown into a world full of awe, dread, wonder, marvel, deep sorrow, and joy.

Poetry at its best calls forth our deep being. It dares us to break free from the safe strategies of the cautious mind; it calls to us, like the wild geese, as Mary Oliver would say, from an open sky. It is a magical art, and always has been -- a making of language spells designed to open our eyes, open our doors and welcome us into a bigger world, one of possibilities we may never have dared to dream of.

This is why poetry can be dangerous as well as necessary. Because we may never be the same again after reading a poem that happens to speak to our own life directly. I know that when I meet my own life in a great poem, I feel opened, clarified, confirmed somehow in what I sensed was true but had no words for. Anything that can do this is surely necessary for the fullness of a human life.

Poetry reaches with its sounds and rhythms down below the realm of the conscious mind to awaken and nourish the imagination. In his poem, "Of Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," WC Williams says:

It is difficult

To get the news from poems

Yet men die miserably every day

For lack

Of what is found there.

What is found there, in the realm of poetry, is what is so often passed over in daily life: the miraculous, the unexpected, the undreamt of. Poems are necessary because they honor the unknown, both in us and in the world. They come from an undiscovered country; they are shaped into form by the power of language, and set free to fly with wings of images and metaphor. Imagine a world in which everything is already known. It would be a dead world, no questions, no wonder, no other possibility. That's what my own world can feel like sometimes when my imagination has gone into retreat. I have discovered that poetry is the phoenix I can fly on to return to that forgotten land.

And yet for all its magic, poetry uses the common currency of our daily speech. It uses words that are known to all of us, but in a sequence and order that surprises us out of our normal speech rhythms and linear thought processes. Its effect is to illuminate our lives and breathe new life, new seeing, new tasting into the world we thought we knew. Poetry bids us eat the apple whole.

To eat the apple of the world whole, we have to learn to pay attention; not only to the inner promptings of the imagination, but to the physical world around us. Poetry is a way of rescuing the world from oblivion by the practice of attention. It is our attention that honors and gives value to living things, that gives them their proper name and particularity; that retrieves them from the obscurity of the general. Poems that galvanize my attention shake me awake. They pass on their attentiveness, their prayerfulness, to me, the reader. And especially when I read them aloud, and shape the sounds on my lips and the rhythms on my breath. This is why poetry can make us more fully human, and more fully engaged in this world. The poet Jane Hirshfield said it this way:

"Whether from reading the New England Transcendentalists or Eskimo poetry, I feel that everything I know about being human has been deepened by the poems I've read."

There's a headstone in a Long Island graveyard -- the one where Jackson Pollock is buried -- that I think encapsulates the value and necessity of poetry in a world of sorrows. It says,

"Artists and poets are the raw nerve ends of humanity. By themselves they can do little to save humanity. Without them there would be little worth saving."