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Ripples and Intersections: Two Meditations on Poetry and Peace

by Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

1. How Poetry Ripples Across Our Lives

A pebble tossed into the water sends ripples that can overtake the pond for a moment or longer, showing us something new and in motion, ancient and coming to stillness. The same is true with us, especially when that pebble is a poem. Poetry, like storytelling and other Transformative Language Arts (the spoken and written word for social and personal transformation), can ripple across people, places, ideologies, ethnicities, traditions, mindsets, and other wide gulfs to show us our innate interconnectedness. After all, according to scientists, humans share over 99% of the same genome, even in how we're different strikes out in sharp and sometimes very violent contrast.

We can better bridge those differences when we see across the gulfs between us how much we often dwell in matching grief, joy, anger, calm, and especially the possibility of better world, which Emily Dickinson beckons her words, "I dwell in Possibility – /A fairer House than Prose." Poetry can be such a bridge to new possibilities for seeing and being. I remember how Sharon, a student of mine, whose mother had just died, found great comfort in the line "What falls away is always. And is near" from Theodore Roethke's poem, "The Waking." Sharon told me how that short line encapsulated how her grief and love—the sense of her mother's presence and absence—were always near, something I've since understood more deeply with the death of my father and other loved ones. This snippet of poetry names for me the most succinct truth I can fathom about our dead beloveds. Poetry has a knack for telling us about the essential human story in such concise ways that it's no wonder we carry bits of lines and poems in our hearts, and in Sharon's case, engraved on a pendant she always wears.

Through the mirror of the poem, we can see our own stories and moments reflected back in stunning clarity. Such clarity and deep seeing makes sense since poetry, like storytelling, is rooted in our oral tradition, which echoes back to how the poetic power of words strung together so that we never forget them can help us pass on messages about who we are and how we are to live. If this sounds a lot like what myth does, it's because it is: myth and poetry come out of the same soulful impulse to use language as a kind of blueprint to bring us back to what's universal and, at times, even beyond the changing whims and dictates of culture. The oral tradition is mythopoetic, using poetic devices to pass on some essence of what it means to be human.

Those poetic devices include rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and other ways words stick together to them easy to remember and pass on. It's no surprise that our oldest remnants of the oral tradition are found in poems, songs, stories, and chants can be easily absorbed, memorized, and recited, such as the old English tale of Beowulf that uses driving rhythms and repetition of sounds, or Aborigine's songlines that link strands of singing to specific paths across the land to name the specific and mythic dimensions of the route. Poetic language makes its own music, enabling humans to pass it on without writing it down. We can even see this in our earliest songs, poems, and stories embedded in our memories, from "Tora Lora Lora" to Mother Goose rhymes to "The Three Little Pigs" to name some of what carries through from my childhood.

A lot of poetry today, in a world where the written word has often outpaced the spoken one, doesn't need to be packed tight in rhyme or song, yet is still a musical and visual art. Likewise, poetry and stories have always been made of images from the get-go. The specificity of an image speaks to our senses, and invites us into the poem. Aristotle explains in his theory of poetry that "The aim of

poetry is to represent the universal through the particular, to give a concrete and living embodiment of universal truth.” William Carlos Williams tells us the poet’s business is “...not to talk in vague categories but to write particularly, as a physician works, upon a patient, upon the thing before him in the particular to discover the universal.”

Ironically enough, we can only scale the universal through the specific. The precise image shows us a larger world because the image is one unique moment caught in time. I compare this to how, when you enter a house for the first time, you wouldn’t necessarily spark a lot of memories, insights, yearnings, and discoveries if the house has no walls, furniture, or knick-knacks picked up from a vendor on a humid day in Paraguay. Imagine, in the living room, someone placing a bluish pink stone, perfectly oval and smooth to the touch, in your palm, and telling you this stone is from a sub-zero day walking along the shore of Lake Superior one February when she was heartbroken over the loss of a dear friend, and your heart and mind might just open in new ways, invoking your own experiences with beauty, loss, nature, rocks, and water. This is how a poem works.

The specificity of a poem is a direct protest about the vague and general rhetoric of war and other forms of violence. As Natalie Goldberg writes in *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*, “Recording the details of our lives is a stance against bombs with their mass ability to kill, against too much speed and efficiency....Our task is to say a holy yes to the real things of our life as they exist....” She goes on to say that accepting things as they are, and coming “to love the details” is a yes to the reality of the world that helps us overcome some of the noes that suppress the details of our lives. In other words, poems, through precise details, put our particular truth out there in our collective discourse—the chirping bluejay on a high swaying branch on a 100-degree morning in Kansas while Congress threatens to repeal Obamacare and the year’s temperature breaks new records—so that the real light and shadows, heartbreaks, and breakthroughs of our lives have their voice alongside whatever the news is replaying every 30 minutes about the hopeless state of things. Voice is power, and poetry gives us back our voice.

Poetry also continues to do its heavy lifting through sound, rhythm, and overall musicality, which in a written form often plays out in line and stanza breaks and length. We tend to read short lines and stanzas slowly and long lines faster, and our eyes tend to land more on beginning and ending words, so I often tell students that the first and last words in a poem, a stanza, and a line tend to weigh more than what’s in between. The sounds of the words catalyze their own resonance. Consider many curse words with all their hard and clipped sounds compared to lullaby words which often sound softer. Each word is a vehicle for tone, and put together, the words create their own rhythm. In fact, all language has its own rhythm (you would clap out the rhythm of this sentence right now), but in poetry, we pay special attention to music.

All in all, poetry is the embodiment of a small change since it innately tilts language a little differently than how we normally encounter words so that we can shift our perspective toward new, ancient, or expanded horizons. Anyone who’s taken poetry writing workshops or read a lot of poems probably already knows that a good poem offers, above all, fresh, original language that helps us to see big or small things in new ways. Along the way, we see our interconnected experience, such as in Joy Harjo’s “A Map the Next World,” in which she writes, “For the soul is a wanderer with many hands and feet.”

As many hands and feet wandering this earth, we can find on the path of poetry just how interconnected we are. According to physicists, we only need look at “The Butterfly Effect,” in which, although it might take a long time, a butterfly flapping its wings in New Mexico could actually cause a

hurricane in China. We are integral parts (and often major disruptors) of our ecosystem, but also of our human communities from how one gesture, word, deed, or mishap can cause everything from minor misunderstandings to major chaos within our families, friend circles, and communities. Poetry, in showing us how to see a path between the ordinary to what else is or isn't in plain sight, illuminates our interconnections and the power of our actions.

Peripheral vision is one of the greatest gifts of poetry, teaching us to look beyond our habitual gaze. Poetry's specific, sensory images that invite in our whole selves, and its musicality that matches the essence of the poem's rhythm with our own heart beat, makes what's under the surface more visible while also illuminating the visible all around us. Adrienne Rich writes in "An Atlas of the Difficult World" of an abused woman, and then tells us how she doesn't want to know "wreckage, dreck and waste, but these are the materials...." reminding us that the path to any real change in the world depends on opening our eyes to the destructive forces in our world. Yet she also reminds us that "the materials" are also the moon rising over such materials along with "...wild treefrogs calling in/ another season, light and music still pouring over/ our fissured, cracked terrain." In this excerpt she shows us both what's often hidden and always visible, calling on us to look openly at the pain of the world but also at the beauty and motion on the peripheral horizon of that pain, offering us new opportunities for, if not always healing and wholeness, at least greater understanding.

Poetry teaches us, in new and renewed ways, how to see and interact with the world we live in, and recognize that we're in good company, human and otherwise. Constantly opening up our perception to see beyond our preconceived notions of reality, poetry leads us to a continual spectrum of learning. We learn that the world is not black and white, and furthermore, composed of a myriad of textures and shapes, all in motion. We learn that humans are far more complex than we imagined, even and especially ourselves. We learn that life is always changing and evolving, often without our consent and outside of our plans.

So what does any of this have to do with peace? We foster peace, in part, by opening our eyes to a wider and deeper view of the world, and in essence, waking up to both the stark realities of trauma, poverty, war, and other violences that are sometimes fueled by misconceptions that we are separate from one another. "For it is important that awake people be awake," William Stafford tells us in his poem, "A Ritual to Read to One Another" before reminding us to give clear signals to those around us because "the darkness around us is deep." A poem can give us an expanded ability to see clearly not just what's wounded and wanting, but what possibilities we have for Tikkun Olam, the Hebrew calling for us all to fix the broken world.

What do we do with the pain and suffering we witness? There's no truer old cliché than "Peace begins with me." The way we work with our feelings of groundlessness, confusion, grief, anger and insecurity have a constant and direct impact on the peace we do or don't cultivate in our lives and the lives around around us. Wendell Berry reminds us how that peace may begin with us, but it's inherently our intersection with the world that makes and keep us. In "The Peace of Wild Things," he tells of resting in this peace: "I come into the presence of still water./ And I feel above me the day-blind stars/ waiting for their light."

2. "Peace at the Crossroads": A Poem and Story

When I was asked to write a poem for the event, "Peace at the Crossroads," organized by the American Friends Service Committee and held in Kansas City in November of 2010, I started with the peace available to us in each breath, a way to inhale and exhale, staying with wherever we are at the

moment, and how each breath is an arrival at a particular intersection of time and place, personal history and world events, the emotional weather coloring how we see the world and the economic, social and artistic weather of the world-at-large. I wanted to show readers and listeners how peace is available in simply staying with whatever we feel, what struggles we face, what critical moments scare or hurt us, what possibilities abound also. Arriving in peace so often means not departing for other distractions, such as turning the anxiety of being present with the hard moments into the distractions of aggression toward ourselves or others.

Pema Chodron, a well-known Tibetan Buddhist nun, writes wisely about this seemingly simple but lifelong lesson of how to stay with what comes. Staying means getting very familiar with our habitual responses to feeling threatened by loss and pain. By understanding how we churn our fear and anxiety into limiting or even hurting ourselves, and silencing or avoiding others, we can better locate the pause button between pain and action. Once we learn to pause in that intersection, we have the opportunity to consider how to move, speak and be in the world in a way that fosters greater peace in our lives and the lives around us.

Life often gives us multiple opportunities to learn this. Not so surprisingly, the evening I went to the Crossroads district of Kansas City, Missouri to read this poem at the small festival, held in a vacant lot between two buildings, I had to make my way through massive crowds racing through the area for the art walk and local bars. By the time I got to the stage to read, the noise was deafening, a little from the little "Peace at the Crossroads" festival, and a lot from hundreds of people laughing or yelling. I was grateful to have both a mic and an audience of a dozen people ready to listen. But after I read this poem, and began to make up an improvised poem about peace, a marching band of eight people dressed up as bears, giraffes, and elephants, spilled over from the art walk, made its way so loudly right in front of me that what I was going to say dissipated. The audience, caught between craning their necks to see where the marching animals went with their toy xylophones and drums, waited to hear what would happen next. Rather than go with the flash of anger from trying to make up poetry in a place whirling with so many other distractions, I took a breath, then said, "In the middle of the poem, the marching animal band comes and tells us to look around. Anything can happen at any moment. And it does."

Peace is at the intersections, humor and ease too, but it starts with us, taking whatever material life gives us, and staying with those materials enough to learn what to do with them.

The Crossroads in Every Step

We breathe in intersections, taking in here,
exhaling there: memory and physiology,
myth and heartwood, daring leap and long sleep.
Peace spreads itself into a recognizable shape--
leaves, the sky between, and mostly the falling
that feeds the base of this tree, the start of another.
The world is made of glimmer and tatters,
the light left by one for another, the dull shine
of mid-afternoon on the driveway gravel,
the iridescent car's reflection in the side-view mirror.

No place that isn't an intersection: you're born out of
two people's meeting, you die by at another crossroads.

No center that's not edge, no time that's not all times,
what you've lived petaling out, what you're living
rooting down, what you may live over the eastern horizon,
a kind of weather that might organize itself into a storm
or fall apart as the blue sky bleeds through.
No matter what happens, the air will be different.

The dragonfly lands on your palm or not.
Nothing ever to hold but this need for holding.
You think you're moving through, but actually
the convergence is moving you.

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