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March 2023

“Let Us Not to the Marriage of True Minds Admit Impediments”: Poetry & Leadership

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Recommended Citation

Mirriam-Goldberg, Caryn, "“Let Us Not to the Marriage of True Minds Admit Impediments”:
Poetry & Leadership" (2023). *Essays & Articles*. 33.

https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/cm_g_essays/33

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**“Let Us Not to the Marriage of True Minds Admit Impediments”:
Poetry & Leadership**

All the arts connect us with parts of ourselves not always in evidence when answering emails, sitting in meetings, or delegating tasks. Writing is the only art that does it in words. Discoveries that articulate themselves as they're revealed enhance our understanding of our communities and ourselves. Furthermore, poetry teaches us how to listen carefully: to the words we read or write, and by extension, to the words we speak or hear. “Let us not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments,” Shakespeare wrote in one of his most famous sonnets, illuminating how listening deeply dissolves what separates us.

As we follow our callings to be leaders in our communities, churches and synagogues, schools, workplaces and government, we can turn to poetry for help with the following:

- **Remember Our Values:** Many people begin leadership positions with the cleanest of intentions. Then reality hits: the co-chair flakes out, the office rent goes up, the team in charge of outreach falls into a vat of inertia, and the foundation supporting the work decides to take its investment another direction. The pressure can build to the point where even the best leader forgets the path that brought her here. “Hold on to what you believe/ even if it’s a tree that stands by itself,” reads a Hopi poem, reminding us to steer by our values.
- **Act Ethically:** Great damage is done by people in leadership positions who don't know their own minds, aren't clear about their biases or intentions, or can't see through their blindnesses. While a poem isn't a cure-all for all the unethical acts of the world's leaders, a poem can aim us toward more ethical action. Songwriter Greg Greenway in his very poetic song “A Road Worth Walking Down,” writes of seeing what he was previously blind to, which led him to wonder about other ways in which he was blind to the issues around him. Such awareness is key to living ethically.

- **Access Wisdom:** How do we know what we know? So often, the most important knowledge in our hearts and minds isn't right on the surface while old beliefs and particularly, old habits, die hard. Accessing the core wisdom that runs down our spines takes both will and surrender, paying close attention and letting go of preconceived notions to make room for what's most true to show itself. As e.e. cummings writes of what we know most deeply, "(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud/ and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows/ higher than the soul can hope or mind can hide)."
- **Cultivate Courage and Inspiration:** "In every heart there is a coward and a procrastinator," writes Mary Oliver, who then reminds us that "In every heart there is a god of flowers, just waiting/ to come out of its cloud and lift its wings." Poetry can give us inspiration as well as help us cultivate courage. Through images, rhythms and what's between the lines in a poem, we can see, through what lives in every heart, how we're not alone, the work is big, and we have our part. We can also see how, despite all the challenges, there are occasional wings to help us lead.
- **Learn How To Live:** Poetry can show us our best answers to the most important question we can ask: how to live? Consider the late Kansas poet William Stafford's poem, "Being a Person," which ends with, "How you stand here is important. How you/ listen for the next things to happen. How you breathe." This poem reminds how the most effective way to lead is to stand with integrity, listen carefully and look deeply, and keep breathing.
- **Expect Surprise:** Poetry, most of all, surprises us, showing us ways in which language can show us something new of the world, or something there all along. David Whyte surprises us in talking about dark times and being alone in his poem "Sweet Darkness," in which he writes, "anything or anyone/ that does not bring you alive/ is too small for you." Poetry is composed of surprise: not just making the invisible visible, but more importantly, making the visible visible.

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg is the 2009-2013 Poet Laureate of Kansas and author or editor of 16 books, including the non-fiction book, *Needle in the Bone: How a Holocaust Survivor and Polish Resistance Fighter Beat the Odds and Found Each other*, and the novel, *The Divorce Girl*. Founder of Transformative Language Arts at Goddard College, where she teaches, Caryn leads community writing workshops widely, and with singer Kelley Hunt Brave Voice writing and singing retreat.

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