

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

January 14, 2019

A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



Prayer

Whatever happens. Whatever
what is is what
I want. Only that. But that.

Galway Kinnell¹

Reflections

In the spirit of that wish for a *happy new year*, I offer this small poem that sings to me of peace, of rest, of liberation. Perhaps this poem works as an antidote for new year's resolutions that may—two weeks in—have already weakened if not failed altogether. Or, if “antidote” is too severe, perhaps the wisdom here is a complement to other, wilder ambitions. Rather than a wish for more, a wish to *go*, a wish to *do*, here instead is a wish to *be*, a prayer that one may desire only what is, “whatever / *what is* is...”

Galway Kinnell says that poetry is nothing if not the human cry of existence, that poetry is the witness for our lives. Jane Hirshfield says it this way: “It is in poetry’s words that life calls to life with the same inevitability and gladness that bird calls to bird, whale to whale, frog to frog. Listening across the night or ocean or pond, they recognize one another and are warmed by that knowledge.”

These may be romantic notions; after all, it does not always feel that life calls gladly to life and if anything the “human cry” may sometimes sound more like human weeping if not a moaning in agony. But I think it is a mistake to equate poetry with luxury rather than with necessity: the cry of existence is the cry of *what is* and life calling to life is a call worth hearing, whatever its intonations, its volume or intensity. Poetry is a way of walking through the woods of the inner life, turning things over so that we may peer into mystery, into beauty, and into the unresolved emotional dilemmas we inherited from the dawn of time and with which we wrestle still: What *is* the meaning of this life? What is it that I want?

I am led again to the beginning, the title of the poem itself: “Prayer.” And I am reminded that the self is almost always in some conflict with the self—whether enduring a need, sustaining a lack, or seeking its fill. I can think of no truer prayer, no greater desire than to learn to rest in desire itself. A prayer for “only that,” a prayer for nothing more than what has been given.

It is 2019, winter again, and this is what is. May it be exactly what you need.

¹ “Prayer” by Galway Kinnell from *Collected Poems*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Used by permission.

✚ About the poet

Galway Kinnell (1927-2014) was an acclaimed professor, poet, translator, and essayist. His career spanned decades and he won both a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award for his *Selected Poems*. A Navy veteran and civil rights activist, Kinnell wrote in response to human experience; “To me,” he famously said, “poetry is somebody standing up, so to speak, and saying, with as little concealment as possible, what it is for him or her to be on earth at this moment.” Richard Tillinghast, writing in the *Boston Review*, explained that Kinnell’s work “is proof that poems can still be written, and written movingly and convincingly, on those subjects that in any age fascinate, quicken, disturb, confound, and sadden the hearts of men and women...”



Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

by Allison Seay, Associate for Religion and the Arts,
St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church © 2019