

# Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

February 11, 2019

A weekly poetry resource

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



## *The Collar*

I struck the board, and cried, "No more;  
    I will abroad!  
What? shall I ever sigh and pine?  
My lines and life are free, free as the road,  
Loose as the wind, as large as store.  
    Shall I be still in suit?  
Have I no harvest but a thorn  
To let me blood, and not restore  
What I have lost with cordial fruit?  
    Sure there was wine  
Before my sighs did dry it; there was corn  
    Before my tears did drown it.  
    Is the year only lost to me?  
    Have I no bays to crown it,  
No flowers, no garlands gay? All blasted?  
    All wasted?  
Not so, my heart; but there is fruit,  
    And thou hast hands.  
Recover all thy sigh-blown age  
On double pleasures: leave thy cold dispute  
Of what is fit and not. Forsake thy cage,  
    Thy rope of sands,  
Which petty thoughts have made, and made to thee  
Good cable, to enforce and draw,  
    And be thy law,  
While thou didst wink and wouldst not see.  
    Away! take heed;  
    I will abroad.  
Call in thy death's-head there; tie up thy fears;  
    He that forbears  
    To suit and serve his need  
    Deserves his load."  
But as I raved and grew more fierce and wild  
    At every word,  
Methought I heard one calling, *Child!*  
    And I replied *My Lord.*

George Herbert<sup>1</sup>

## Reflections

If you were present at the Forum between worship services at St. Stephen's last Sunday, you heard this poem by George Herbert discussed as an example of the ecstatic tradition—poetry's long history of

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<sup>1</sup> "The Collar" by George Herbert. Public Domain.

attempting to wrestle an experience of the divine, the sublime and the transcendent into formal verse. The poetry of ecstasy also includes articulations of those moments of explosive clarity, of epiphany, as in Herbert's "The Collar."

While one should never assume that the poet is also the speaker, it would be a mistake to gloss over the fact that Herbert was indeed a parish priest, a man who, in his day, was seen as a model of stability, piety, and faithfulness—to tradition, to worship, to order. And so, the literal priestly collar—with its connotations of ownership and servitude—becomes blurred with a metaphoric collar of faith. Herbert, though the epitome of devotion, was not particularly shy about the sacrifices the faithful are called to make nor was he, as this poem illustrates, private about the desire to once and for all cast off that collar ("No more; / I will abroad!"), reject its restrictions ("Forsake thy cage!"), and be free. So free, in fact, that he might recoup what's been lost thus far and make up for all he has missed with "double pleasures," forgoing the "cold dispute/ of what is fit and not."

The poem's form suggests a kind of freedom: there is a quickness to its semi-regular rhythm and its monosyllabic cadence and the uneven line lengths may suggest a waywardness of thought and of emotional unrest. It is a poem technically looser than, say, a sonnet, (a reflection of the speaker's temptation to if not completely unbind himself, to at least loosen that which restricts him) but still formally constrained by both metrical pattern as well as rhyme scheme. The question implied: is one ever really free?

The poem's epiphany—manifest in those last four lines—is an answer to that question. And in short, no, we cannot escape. At least Herbert cannot; he cannot escape God nor his fear of God and if anything this poem is evidence that indeed even the most righteous do sometimes despair. In fact, the poem argues, the more one "rave[s]...fierce and wild" the clearer one hears the call; that last rhyme—"word" and "Lord"—restores a kind of divine clarity for the poet, an acknowledgment that true liberation is but an illusion.

Ultimately, it is a poem of hope, I think—a poem of recovery of faith, a winding rant only to end where we first began but with a shock of recognition: we are bound. And Herbert's collar of faith may be seen now not as a burden but a guide, keeping him connected to the divine, the One to whom he does indeed belong.

### ✠ About the Poet

**George Herbert** (1593-1633) was born in Wales and became a parish priest. Scholars nestle his work within the Age of Shakespeare and the Age of Milton and he was especially important in the 17th century, not only as a poet but as a cultural icon, an image of religious and political stability held up for emulation during tumultuous times. He is, along with John Donne, considered one of the great metaphysical poets.



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