

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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This Morning I Pray for My Enemies

And whom do I call my enemy?
An enemy must be worthy of engagement.
I turn in the direction of the sun and keep walking.
It's the heart that asks the question, not my furious mind.
The heart is the smaller cousin of the sun.
It sees and knows everything.
It hears the gnashing even as it hears the blessing.
The door to the mind should only open from the heart.
An enemy who gets in, risks the danger of becoming a friend.

Joy Harjo¹

☞ Reflections

The very first line of this poem seems to me a poem in and of itself. If I am being most honest, I admit that I have a *sense* of having enemies though I may not (or cannot) name them specifically. It is easier for me to name an antagonist, an agitator, my adversary or adversaries, those who I feel are against my values and my standards for decency. But enemy? If an enemy is, as Harjo writes, “worthy of engagement,” it calls into question for me whom, indeed, do I call, by name, an enemy?

The poem is wrestling with the tension between the heart and the mind—something most of us know a lot about. Our logic and our passion are often at odds and while it is a curious statement that “the heart is the smaller cousin of the sun,” it seems an accurate metaphor: the heart, afire, is often the force around which, like the sun, everything else revolves. I sometimes wish the relationship between my rational, practical, knowing-better mind and my sometimes belligerent, blazing, mess of a heart were a happier marriage. Perhaps if it were so, there would be no enemy to question in the first place, there would be no inner or outer conflict, and all would be well. Even if it is true that the heart is our omniscient voice—“it sees and knows everything,” writes Harjo—it doesn't mean it always makes the right decisions.

From the Latin *inimicus*, meaning “bad friend,” the word enemy, interestingly, if not paradoxically, includes in its definition its apparent opposite. In other words, we depend on

¹ “This Morning I Pray for My Enemies” by Joy Harjo from *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings: Poems*, W. W. Norton & Company. Used by permission.

our knowledge of what “friend” means in order to understand its counterpart, its contrast and rival. (It reminds me of the [ironic] way the word “atheism” depends on the use of the word “God” in order to articulate its own set of beliefs, or non-beliefs, as the case may be.) Regardless, I don’t think the poem is trying to tie us in rhetorical knots. Rather, I think Harjo’s point is made as a hopeful question: What does it take to turn an enemy into a friend? What are the dangers and risks? And who are the enemies? Are our enemies simply adversaries in the drama of our lives, meant to disrupt the inertia of a day so to expand what we think we know?

This poem reminds me of what the critic Helen Vendler says in her lectures, that “poetry is proof that the mind continues to understand what the heart cannot endure.” There is so much to learn. For me, this learning is why I turn to poetry, whose aim is to make sense of the unknown through use of the known or, in this case, to understand the “bad friend” by way of the good.

When I taught literature, especially the short story, my students and I would discuss ways in which the enemy—the antagonist, the opposition, the conflict—was crucial to a story *being* a story. Without conflict, there is no story; it’s instead a meditation. It is in reconciling *for* and *against* that we come to some resolution. And so, without tension, there’s nothing to resolve. I don’t pretend to have the answers; I don’t know how to resolve the tensions of my own troubled heart and “furious mind” much less the tensions of the world. But, like a lot of my favorite poems, it’s a prayer thinly veiled. I am reminded that it is often as noble and worthy a pursuit to attend to the balm as it is to attend to the fire.

✂ About the poet

Much of Joy Harjo’s work is set in the American Southwest and her poems are often perceived as tributes to the voiceless, the dispossessed, and the forgotten. Known for writing about the need for justice and compassion, Harjo’s voice is an important one in cultural and political discourse. One critic writes of the way she “resurrects the carnage” of long-standing conflict in order to inspire a more peaceful future. Her poetry also speaks to more universal concerns about responsibility, creation, and history. In an interview, she was asked about the voice (and voicelessness) of a marginalized people in the United States and she responds like this: “[Native Americans have] been exiled and [have] disappeared in our own country.... I think we’re in a kind of exile. But maybe most Americans are in exile from where their spiritual core is, and they don’t know it. They wonder why they aren’t happy, why they’re confused, why they want to buy more.” But, she says, “We will all make it through, despite politics and wars, despite failures and misunderstandings. There is only love.”



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