

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

April 2, 2018

A weekly poetry resource

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



blessing the boats
(at St. Mary's)

may the tide
that is entering even now
the lip of our understanding
carry you out
beyond the face of fear
may you kiss
the wind then turn from it
certain that it will
love your back may you
open your eyes to water
water waving forever
and may you in your innocence
sail through this to that

Lucille Clifton¹

Reflections

A popular poem at convocations and commencements, “blessing the boats” is one of those lyrics that has a tried and true wisdom to it. It’s gentle, hopeful, sweet. It does not ask too much of its reader; it does not convolute or contradict, does not tangle or torture, does not baffle or bewilder. The challenge of this poem, you see, is not in the reading but in the doing. It’s a call to action as much as it is a call to faith, and in this case one is as difficult as the other.

It may be helpful to know that the Blessing of the Fleet is a centuries-old tradition that began in predominantly Roman Catholic fishing communities to ensure safe passages and bountiful seasons for local watermen; it also commemorates the blessing of the boats that carried the first English settlers to Maryland on St. Clement’s Island, home of nearby St. Mary’s College, where Lucille Clifton taught for many years. In fact, Clifton’s “blessing of the boats” is imprinted on the wall leading to the dining hall at the college.

¹ “blessing the boats” by Lucille Clifton from *Quilting: Poems 1987-1990*, BOA Editions, Ltd. Used by permission.

In a world that seems to value solution over exploration and certainty over curiosity, Clifton’s challenge to us is one requiring courage. The poem is not only about boats, of course, but about people—people with fear, with doubt, people venturing into the vast unknown. This may be understood in any number of ways; we acknowledge risk all the time and make decisions based on what we perceive to be the danger and the reward. A way that I am reading this poem now, in our Easter season, is through the lens of the Christian narrative. The Easter story—of resurrection and hope, loss and recovery alike—is indeed just beyond the “lip of our understanding” in such a way that I am only able to explain it as grace, a gift I cannot comprehend and perhaps do not deserve. As I “sail through this to that” and as tides come in and go out and as wind and snow and volatile weather—grief, joy, anxiety, peace—change the course of my travel, faith has never felt more essential to safety.

Clifton’s work is often centered on themes concerning endurance in the face of hardship, strength in the face of fear. Though her poems are often focused more particularly on African-American and female experience, they are also at their core, of and about the *human* experience. In an interview published in the *Antioch Review*, Clifton explained, “Writing is a way of continuing to hope ... perhaps for me it is a way of remembering I am not alone. ... I would like to be seen as a woman whose roots go back to Africa, who tried to honor being human.”

Scholars point out that her poetry is one of spaciousness and that she communicates more for saying less. One critic notes, “The first thing that strikes us about Lucille Clifton’s poetry [especially ‘blessing the boats’] is what is missing: capitalization, punctuation, long and plentiful lines. We see a poetry so pared down that its spaces take on substance, become a shaping presence as much as the words themselves.” It is in that spirit of essential absence and pregnant space that I understand and am moved by Clifton’s poem as one of prayer. And as I wish you a happy Easter season, I pray for you too the same assuredness of the wind’s love and the water’s eternity, “waving forever” as you sail.

✪ About the Poet

Lucille Clifton (1936-2010) was the first writer to have two books of poetry chosen as finalists for the Pulitzer Prize, *Good Woman: Poems and a Memoir, 1969-1980* (1987) and *Next: New Poems* (1987) and the first African-American recipient of the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize for lifetime achievement. She served as Maryland’s poet laureate from 1974 until 1985, and won the prestigious National Book Award for *Blessing the Boats: New and Selected Poems 1988-2000* (2000). She was a Distinguished Professor of Humanities at St. Mary’s College of Maryland and a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.



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