

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

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



A Poem of Thanks

I have been spared another day
to come into this night
as though there is a mercy in things
mindful of me. Love, cast all
thought aside. I cast aside
all thought. Our bodies enter
their brief precedence,
surrounded by their sleep.
Through you I rise, and you
through me, into the joy
we make, but may not keep.

Wendell Berry¹

Reflections

The New York Times Magazine recently published an article about Tracy K. Smith, the current United States poet laureate. It is a beautiful piece that offers a bit of biography, a bit of anthropology, and more than a bit of inspiration. The article, “Tracy K. Smith, America’s Poet Laureate, Is a Woman With a Mission: Can bringing poetry to the masses be an antidote to our toxic civic culture?” is available [here](#). In her role as laureate, she has taken poetry on the road, giving readings in unlikely places, particularly rural areas where most writers (especially of her stature) would be unlikely to visit. Her mission, as the title suggests, is to use poetry to, in her words, “probe the spots where our culture is most sore.” In probing, as I am wont to believe, we become agents for healing; in tending carefully to wounds, we are perhaps more likely to realize the balm they need.

The article has me thinking anew about the role of poetry in our society, in our politics, in our social and civic spheres. The next edition of *Wellspring* will center on one of Smith’s poems, but this week I wanted to use her voice—and her mission—to frame a poem many of you might already know by Wendell Berry. Berry is one of our most popular contemporary poets, his poems some of the most quoted, most memorized, and most beloved. His language is accessible, the images familiar, and his wisdom universal. And though there is little external similarity—Berry is 83 years old, a white male, living a relatively

¹ “A Poem of Thanks” by Wendell Berry from *Collected Poems*, North Point Press. Used by permission.

reclusive life on his Kentucky farm while Smith is almost 40 years his junior, a black woman, and teaching at Princeton—it strikes me that there is a shared understanding of poetry’s highest task: to honor the human spirit, to open us to mystery, to engage the senses, to inspire curiosity, and to embrace ambiguity as a way, even circuitously, toward truth and clarity. The mission, then, is a shared one; I have to believe that Berry would agree with Smith’s claim that “the meditative state of mind a poem induces...can be a ‘rehumanizing force,’ an antidote to the din of daily life...” It’s one reason I like this particular poem, “A Poem of Thanks,” for it seems to me illustrative of the very force Smith invokes.

In this case, I think the title works as its own line of poetry and that, coupled with the actual first line, may be the very essence of gratitude, distilled: “A Poem of Thanks / I have been spared another day.” If it ended there, I would be convinced of “the mercy in things”: that we’re here at all is worthy of meditation if not celebration.

I’m particularly interested in the mysterious “you” of the poem—“Through you I rise, and you / through me”—because it speaks to me of symbiosis, of shared experience, of communion. Is “you” the Divine? Is it a particular being, a body entered? Is it gratitude personified? I think all are possible and it is that kind of pregnant mystery that opens me to possibility, that very mystery that rehumanizes and invites me into the “meditative state.” What does it mean that we rise into one another and at what point do the metaphorical and literal lines blur beyond distinction? What is the implication—and the responsibility—that our joy be dependent on this “you,” this other? And what does it mean for us that in our experience of rising joy we must also prepare for its transience, our fall? What else is here that we “may not keep”?

I delight in the poem’s other lyric gifts, too: its nuance; the repetition and syntactical shifting (“Love, cast all / thought aside. I cast aside / all thought”); the primal image of the body becoming what it once was, or becoming something other than a physical form, its sleep-surrounded “precedence.” I especially admire the adjustment in point of view, from a poem of “I” to a poem of “us.” This becomes not a singular experience but a shared “us-ness”—it is the joy *we* make, not *I*. The realization that gratitude requires acknowledgment *outside* of the self may serve as balm, a reminder that there is, after all, so much—and there are so many—to thank. This poem invites us to begin.

✧ About the Poet

Wendell Berry—poet, novelist, essayist, and environmentalist—lives on a farm near his birthplace in Port Royal, Kentucky. Author of over 40 books, he is celebrated for his faithful attention to the natural world and to the sacredness of all life. As the *Christian Science Monitor* writes, “Berry’s poems shine with the gentle wisdom of a craftsman who has thought deeply about the paradoxical strangeness and wonder of life.”



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