

# Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

May 14, 2018

A weekly poetry resource  
from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



## *How Many Nights*

How many nights  
have I lain in terror,  
O Creator Spirit, Maker of night and day,

only to walk out  
the next morning over the frozen world  
hearing under the creaking of snow  
faint, peaceful breaths...  
snake,  
bear, earthworm, ant...

and above me a wild crow crying 'yaw yaw yaw'  
from a branch nothing cried from ever in my life.

Galway Kinnell<sup>1</sup>

## ✧ Reflections

It is rare to have on record the poet speaking directly about his poem. But in an interview published in 1970, Kinnell responds to direct questions regarding "How Many Nights," its ambiguous tone, its implied impatience in those opening lines, its mystery, its puzzling last line, that crow.<sup>2</sup> Here is what Kinnell says:

In writing a poem one has a certain intention perhaps, but when the poem is finished you can't be sure that it remains in the poem. When I wrote "How Many Nights" I was thinking of moving from a night of terror to a dawn in which one senses hibernating animals under the winter, and the knowledge that they will be reborn in spring, to the possibility of rebirth within oneself. I wrote the poem as a kind of prayer.

As we approach the end of the 50 days of Easter, I find this poem a particularly poignant example—and Kinnell explains it better than I ever could—of the way my poetic consciousness is in relationship with my spiritual discernment. In this same interview, when asked about the crow in the poem, he says, "I try to feel out how the animal may represent me and my deepest life. I think it's the dream of every poem—to be a myth." That resonates with me; I can no more easily articulate a profound response to a poem that affects me

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<sup>1</sup> "How Many Nights" by Galway Kinnell from *Body Rags*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Used by permission.

<sup>2</sup> "Deeper than Personality: A Conversation with Galway Kinnell." *The Iowa Review*, 1.2 (1970).

deeply than I can a worship experience that moves me in what I can only identify as “my deepest life.” I can no sooner answer the question “what makes a poem a poem?” than I can “what makes a prayer a prayer?” Or perhaps my answer would be the same for each: the inner self—the soul, I suppose—engaged in a work it cannot fully know, summoning a force beyond the limits of language, beyond understanding, beyond the ego, and certainly beyond analysis.

“How many nights / have I lain in terror .../only to walk out / the next morning...”

I admit, even (and especially) when I am teaching certain elements of prosody, or explaining metaphor, that indeed there comes a point when interpreting poetry—the paraphrasing, the pinning down—becomes fruitless and maddening in the way an attempt to ascertain the meaning of life is interesting but ultimately unsayable. This is not to say that the close study and care of a poem does not almost always reward the attentive and patient reader. But, as Kinnell says, “Life itself is insulted by having to be justified by a goal; life *is* and that is all there is to it. And to open oneself to the rhythm of reality, the whole rhythm of being born and dying, while it is awful, since it means facing your terror of death, it is also glorious.” And so it is with some poetry: its rhythm, its glory, its awe, its *is*-ness.

A noted theologian, Karen Armstrong, has said that all good theology is really a species of poetry, attempts to express the inexpressible. It is perhaps that very notion the wild crow from its branch so perfectly cries and perhaps our prayer as well: *Yaw, yaw, yaw*. That is, *we are, life is, it's here*.

### ✞ About the poet

Galway Kinnell’s career spanned decades and he won both a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award for his 1982 collection *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.” Also an acclaimed professor, translator, and essayist, he lived in Vermont for many years until his death in 2014 at the age of 87.



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