

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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



How to Be a Poet (to remind myself)

Make a place to sit down.
Sit down. Be quiet.
You must depend upon
affection, reading, knowledge,
skill—more of each
than you have—inspiration,
work, growing older, patience,
for patience joins time
to eternity. Any readers
who like your poems,
doubt their judgment.

Breathe with unconditional breath
the unconditioned air.
Shun electric wire.
Communicate slowly. Live
a three-dimensioned life;
stay away from screens.
Stay away from anything
that obscures the place it is in.
There are no unsacred places;
there are only sacred places
and desecrated places.

Accept what comes from silence.
Make the best you can of it.
Of the little words that come
out of the silence, like prayers
prayed back to the one who prays,
make a poem that does not disturb
the silence from which it came.

Wendell Berry¹

¹ "How to Be a Poet" by Wendell Berry from *Given*; Shoemaker Hoard. Used by permission.

☞ Reflections

I have spent this spring's 10-week covenant period at St. Stephen's revisiting some earlier editions of *Wellspring* and it has been a fruitful exercise for me. In the same way that I used to teach my students to first experience a poem without a pen in their hand, so to lessen the anxiety of having to analyze it, I have found a similar delight in returning to poetry I already know well. Perhaps it is akin to the pleasure we derive in listening to songs whose lyrics we have committed to memory, or in rewatching films whose conclusions we know before we begin, or in reading the same passages of scripture time and again, noticing the ways we respond differently, prismatically, to the same words and stories we have been hearing for years, if not a lifetime, those things we know by heart. So it is with the best of poetry; it rewards the careful reader and its gifts are inexhaustible. Like most things we cherish, the longer we spend in love, the more mysterious it all becomes.

I have always admired this instructive and inspiring poem of Wendell Berry's; it's a much gentler how-to than Ernest Hemingway's advice, which goes: "There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed." No, what Berry is inviting us into is as much a space for writing poetry as it is for being a more mindful, more attuned, and more receptive human being. After all, one need not be a writer of poems to "breathe with unconditional breath" or to "communicate slowly" or to "accept what comes from silence." These are not lessons for writers, but for all of us who might need some gentle shepherding (Berry is not the only one who needs a reminder!) towards a quieter and less destructive existence, one more in harmony with the world around us and with the one who made us.

This poem strikes me as work well-positioned for the Easter season. As we consider all that is life-giving, life-renewing, and life-saving, poetry can be a rich reminder of the difference between resuscitation and resurrection, which is the difference, for me, in surviving and thriving, and in being and well-being, the kind of difference a more imaginative, more generous, and more careful life offers. To "[l]ive a three-dimensioned life" is to practice living fully into the human experience—its pleasures, sorrows, hungers, mercies, loves—and more awake to what Berry calls, in another poem, "the peace of wild things."

I am moved by his assertion that "[t]here are no unsacred places; / ...only sacred places / and desecrated places." Isn't this what we were taught as children? That the earth—*all* the earth, *all* the places—is a thing to be cherished, is precious, is not but a resource for our use and consumption but the very life-source itself? It's not a poet's work to save it, specifically, but a human's work. This is one of those poems that speaks the heart's language in a way that commentary or analysis can never match. Berry himself may paraphrase it best in his poem called "A Standing Ground."

Better than any argument is to rise at dawn
and pick dew-wet red berries in a cup.

✚ About the poet

Wendell Berry, born in 1934, is a poet, novelist, essayist, and environmentalist who 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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