

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

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



won't you celebrate with me

won't you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight
my other hand; come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.

Lucille Clifton¹

Reflections

Much has been written about this poem over the years but perhaps nothing so specific and lyrical as Robin Ekiss' essay for the Poetry Foundation² which introduces Clifton's work this way: "In the 1960s, when this poem was written, the struggles of the civil rights movement awakened a new sense of self-awareness for African-Americans, generations of whom had experienced both an historical exile from Africa and a metaphorical exile from the so-called American Dream....Clifton's poem presents the speaker's survival in the face of mortal danger as a triumph to be celebrated."

¹ "won't you celebrate with me" by Lucille Clifton from *Book of Light*, Copper Canyon Press. Used by permission.

² <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69412/lucille-clifton-wont-you-celebrate-with-me>

Of course there are innumerable artists influenced and inspired by Martin Luther King Jr. and the movement he led, whose triumphs we do celebrate today, and Clifton is certainly among those writers who helped shape a generation by creating work that honors, chronicles, questions, strengthens, unites and clarifies something of what it means to be a human being, particularly a human being in America in a given time and place.

As Ekiss explains in her essay, “won’t you celebrate with me” begins with a question that is “part invitation, part plea” and it draws from several sources—from Psalm 137 to Walt Whitman and John Keats—as it explores identity, race, gender and one’s very livelihood. The year 1968 was of course marked by the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the widespread riots that followed, and the eventual passage of a new Civil Rights Act. And yet, the long and difficult work of justice, freedom and equality is far from over.

As readers of Wellspring may know by now, I hope, it is my belief that good poetry is never about only one thing, and that when it invokes something particular it is toward that noble pursuit of transcending it. Today’s offering is meant to honor the lives and the work of both Lucille Clifton and Martin Luther King Jr., of course, but it is also meant to honor the work and lives of all who suffer and strive, all who work for good, and all who have triumphed in spite of threat, danger or fear.

Part invitation, part plea: come celebrate with me.

✂ About the poet

Lucille Clifton (1936-2010) is noted for saying much using little and her work is often characterized by what it is missing—capitalization, punctuation, conventional syntax. Emphasizing endurance and strength through adversity and focusing particularly on African-American experience, womanhood, and family life, her poetry, as she explained in an interview with Antioch Review “is a way of continuing to hope...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.” Clifton served as the poet laureate of the state of Maryland and has influenced generations of writers, artists and activists.



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