

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

February 17, 2020

A weekly poetry resource

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



A Message

As the arc moves out to the circle,
As pole cries aloud unto pole,
As the brook rusheth on to its ocean,
As soul leaps aloft to its Soul,

So I know in the infinite spaces
In the infinite aeons of time,
Somewhere my broken life traces
The curve of its orbit sublime.

Somewhere to the longing and yearning
And hunger, fruition shall come.
Somewhere I know I shall find thee
And my heart nestle sweetly at home.

Anna Julia Cooper¹

Reflections

An Anna Julia Cooper collection in the digital archives of Howard University includes several hand-written manuscripts of Cooper's—poems, notes, letters—which have been preserved with support from the Anna Julia Cooper Society, an organization whose mission it is to engage in collaborative research efforts and scholarly projects that celebrate her life and work. Cooper's biography is inspiring, remarkable not only for her achievements but for her persistence, her boldness in protest, and her steadfastness in the face of opposition. Throughout her own distinguished education and long teaching career, she emphasized at every turn the importance of high-quality education to the future vibrancy of African Americans and she was critical, particularly, of the support they received—that is, the support they did not receive—from academic, religious, and government institutions.

While she is more famous for her scholarship than her poetry, I wish to appreciate the elegance of this poem, “A Message,” and to celebrate its lyricism and resolution: “...I know in the infinite spaces / ...I know I shall find thee....” Its hymn structure reminds me of

¹ “A Message” by Anna Julia Cooper from Digital Howard@ Howard University, 2017.
http://dh.howard.edu/ajc_france/2

Emily Dickinson's work, particularly in its marrying of the small and the vast, its wrestling of the cosmic dimension into a deceptively simple form. "As the arc moves out to the circle" so the poem moves outward from the poet—the lowercase, singular "soul" leaping, in the span of a single phrase, "aloft to its Soul."

Of course, it is not too difficult to see in the tensions of the poem something of the poet's own experience: her "broken life traces / the curve of its orbit sublime." And not too difficult, either, to affirm that Cooper's hunger for more—more justice, more opportunity, more equality—has been matched with a new generation's desire for the same. That hunger continues, but this meal is far from over, and the work is far from finished.

The Episcopal Church honors Anna Julia Cooper later this month (February 28) and offers this collect for her feast day: *Almighty God, who inspired your servant Anna Julia Haywood Cooper with the love of learning and the skill of teaching: Enlighten us more and more through the discipline of learning, and deepen our commitment to the education of all your children; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

✧ About the poet

Anna Julia Haywood Cooper (c1859-1964) was born in Raleigh, North Carolina, to an enslaved woman and the man most presume to have been her mother's master. Educator, reformer, advocate and scholar, she was an academically gifted child and received a scholarship to attend St. Augustine Normal School (now St. Augustine's College) and Collegiate Institute, a school founded by the Episcopal Church to educate African-American teachers and clergy so that they might educate formerly enslaved people and their families. It was here she began her membership in the Episcopal Church and here she began what would become her lifelong vocation to inspire, teach, and mentor generations of students. Her first book, *A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South*, published in 1892, is perhaps her most well-known work and is widely regarded as one of the first articulations of black feminism, exploring race relations, gender inequality, poverty, and a need for radical change. In 1925, Cooper became the fourth African-American woman to complete a Ph.D, granted from the Sorbonne when she was 65 years old. She died in her sleep at the age of 105 and her memorial was held in a chapel on the campus of St. Augustine's College, where her academic career began. She was buried in the City Cemetery in Raleigh, beside her husband. In 2009, a tuition-free private middle school was opened and named in her honor in North Church Hill, Richmond, Virginia, with St. Stephen's Church as one of its founders.



Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

by Allison Seay, Associate for Religion and the Arts,
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church © 2020