

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

April 6, 2020

A weekly poetry resource

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



from *Kindness*

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.

You must wake up with sorrow.

You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to gaze at bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.

Naomi Shihab Nye¹

Reflections

Wellspring has featured several poems by Naomi Shihab Nye (and, spoiler alert, she's likely to appear in next week's edition of *Wellspring*, too) and this particular one, "Kindness," became one of several widely circulated poems on the internet when stay-at-home orders to stop the spread of the novel coronavirus were first put in place. Interestingly, this poem is from a collection of Nye's selected work that was published over 25 years ago and has been carried in the pockets and in the hearts of readers all over the globe for just as long. It reads now as an oracle of sorts, as if Nye had had some premonition that we would one day be needing words just like these to sustain us during our difficult weeks of distance.

As many of you may know, April 1 marked the beginning of National Poetry Month—an occasion inaugurated by the Academy of American Poets in 1996 to promote all things poetry: literacy and libraries, book-making and bookstores, public readings and community events—all in order to remind us that poetry has an integral role in the health and preservation of a culture and in the understanding of our humanity. Poets have, through the ages, gone on the record as saying that as long as people continue to fall in love, as long as they endure their suffering and then triumph over it, as long as people continue to bury their

¹ Excerpted from "Kindness" from *Words Under the Words: Selected Poems*, The Eighth Mountain Press, 1994.

dead and grieve for what is lost, as long as they search for meaning and God and purpose—in other words, as long as human existence continues, poetry will have an important place in our common life.

In these last weeks, in these unprecedented circumstances, poetry is thriving. And I am not surprised. People are turning to the arts, as they have since the beginning, for solace and strength amid fear and uncertainty, for beauty and meaning amid despair and chaos. In times of distress and alarm, it is song, poetry, prayer, and creative expression of every kind that tend to offer some unifying salve, a sense that, somehow, we are not alone, that goodness and joy and kindness and love are out there—and have been there all along—just waiting to accompany us, “like a shadow or a friend.”

It is possible that the backstory for “Kindness” is as well-known as the poem itself: Nye and her husband were on their honeymoon in South America and, a week into what was supposed to be a three-week trip, they were robbed of everything they had while riding on a bus in Colombia. Another passenger on that bus was killed. These are obviously not the circumstances under which most of us would write a poem about kindness.

The story goes that Nye and her husband—with no passport, no money, no one to call—were approached by a man who noticed their distress, asked what happened, and responded with what surely felt like divine kindness that he was, simply, very sorry. Very, very sorry. Nye then went to a nearby plaza and wrote this poem. The first lines read, “Before you know what kindness really is / you must lose things.”

I cannot help myself, these days especially, saying yes, yes and how true, how true. Who knew we could love each other like this? Who knew we would miss each other so? Who knew it would take our isolation to know about true companionship? Who knew we were capable of this kind of resilience, this kindness? Who knew we had so much still to learn?

✧ About the Poet

Naomi Shihab Nye (b. 1952) was born in St. Louis, Missouri, though she spent much of her adolescence and young adulthood in San Antonio, Texas, and Jerusalem. Her father was a Palestinian refugee and a journalist and her mother an American of German and Swiss descent. Author of many poetry collections, children’s books, and essays, Nye served as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets from 2010 to 2015. She is considered one of the leading poets of the American Southwest and, after the World Trade Center attacks in 2001, hers became an important and active voice for Arab-Americans, speaking out against terrorism and prejudice. She has taught poetry all over the world and is now a professor of creative writing at Texas State University.



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