

# Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

April 13, 2020

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



## *Famous*

The river is famous to the fish.

The loud voice is famous to silence,  
which knew it would inherit the earth  
before anybody said so.

The cat sleeping on the fence is famous to the birds  
watching him from the birdhouse.

The tear is famous, briefly, to the cheek.

The idea you carry close to your bosom  
is famous to your bosom.

The boot is famous to the earth,  
more famous than the dress shoe,  
which is famous only to floors.

The bent photograph is famous to the one who carries it  
and not at all famous to the one who is pictured.

I want to be famous to shuffling men  
who smile while crossing streets,  
sticky children in grocery lines,  
famous as the one who smiled back.

I want to be famous in the way a pulley is famous,  
or a buttonhole, not because it did anything spectacular,  
but because it never forgot what it could do.

Naomi Shihab Nye<sup>1</sup>

## Reflections

*Wellspring* featured this poem in September of 2019, at what was the beginning of a new and promising program year at St. Stephen's Church, a year brimming with offerings of all kinds— new classes and workshops, visiting speakers and educational offerings, concerts and retreats and missions and celebrations. While we are learning now that there were plenty

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<sup>1</sup> "Famous" by Naomi Shihab Nye first published in *Words Under the Words: Selected Poems* by Far Corner Books, 1995.

well before last fall who feared the novel coronavirus and who even predicted this very pandemic, I for one was surely inattentive to the dangers we faced and fully unprepared for the ways in which the whole world would change by springtime. Last autumn, I would never have guessed that by April countries all across the globe would be suffering what seems a nearly-overnight economic disaster; I would never have guessed that so many would fall ill so quickly, would go hungry and unseen and would lose their lives; and I would never have guessed that Christians around the world would be unable to receive Holy Communion on Easter Day.

It has been helpful to me, even hopeful, in these days of distance and quarantine, to revisit previous editions of *Wellspring* if only to remember what life was like and how I was thinking about it. Sometimes when I revise old poems of my own or add to the ongoing list of books I hope to reread, I am reminded of the sheer pleasures of recollection and familiarity. What comfort I find in simply knowing ahead of time how the story will end.

In these last weeks I have read Nye's poetry with fresh eyes and read even my own words of reflection, written not that long ago, from a distance that now feels a world away. What I said then, is what I say again: The joy in writing *Wellspring* is, for me, a reminder that poems are supremely patient. They are not squeaking their wheels, whining for my attention; they are not needy or burdensome, shouting their demands. Instead, I like thinking that they wait as long as they must, perhaps a lifetime, for their reader to arrive and discover the gifts therein. In other words, poems are simply there being "famous" for us, alive with a kind of fame I had not thought to redefine myself. It is like the feeling of hearing a perfect song, or meeting the perfect company: how did I live so long without this?

The way I have thought about Naomi Shihab Nye's redefinition of fame—of the object to the subject, the unknown to the knowing—is something like an unrequited love, a realization that love unreturned does not diminish or undo the love being given. Nye's poem ultimately raises questions that transcend it: who or what is capable of being famous, and to whom? Can a pulley be famous? What does it mean to realize we can all be famous to one another without knowing it? The poem suggests in its final two stanzas that if to be famous means not simply to be familiar or known at all, but to be known for kindness, for generosity and warmth, known for an ordinary dutifulness, daily love and need-meeting, then we all might do well to seek fame after all.

I am thinking of my son, famous to me even before his birth as I suppose my body might have been famous to him, and understanding now that I might be famous to all who have loved me my whole life long, and all who I love are famous to me. What a beautiful responsibility we have in maintaining this kind of awareness! The poet Edward Hirsch calls it the "the secret enchantment we carry" and I think I now echo in earnest this speaker's desire: I want to be famous, too, as the buttonhole is famous—not for anything extraordinary, but for continuing to do whatever it is I am meant to do. Or, when I am uncertain about what or who it is I am supposed to be, I would like to be famous for doing the next right thing, ever onward in life, trying hard and meaning well.

Perhaps I am drawn to this poem, too, as a personal prayer, that I might notice and honor the world in all its fame and glory, that I might stay true, attentive, and faithful, that I might use whatever power I have for good, and that I might—even when a struggle and especially to those “sticky children in grocery lines”—smile back.

Now, more than ever, we need one another; you who do not think you are famous at all and you who wonder whether you missed a chance at fame, know this: it’s a whole new world now, resurrection is real, and now is as good a time as any to be as famous as we can be.

### ✚ About the poet

**Naomi Shihab Nye** (b. 1952), born in St. Louis to a Palestinian father and an American mother, has traveled the world promoting love and justice, peace and poetry. 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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