

# Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

July 13, 2020

A weekly poetry resource

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



*blessing the boats*  
(at St. Mary's)

may the tide  
that is entering even now  
the lip of our understanding  
carry you out  
beyond the face of fear  
may you kiss  
the wind then turn from it  
certain that it will  
love your back    may you  
open your eyes to water  
water waving forever  
and may you in your innocence  
sail through this to that

Lucille Clifton<sup>1</sup>

## Reflections

A popular reading at convocations and commencements, “blessing the boats” is a lyric of timeless wisdom. I offered this poem once two springs ago—in April 2018—which, in so many ways, may as well have been a century if not a lifetime ago. How innocent we were then, that April, entirely unaware of the ways we would be challenged now. How little we knew. And still, the challenge of this poem is what it was then: a call to action as much as a call to faith, one often as difficult as the other.

For some context, it may be helpful to know that the Blessing of the Fleet is a centuries-old tradition that began in predominantly Roman Catholic fishing communities to ensure safe passages and bountiful seasons for local watermen; it also commemorates the blessing of the boats that carried the first English settlers to Maryland on St. Clement's Island, home of nearby St. Mary's College, where Lucille Clifton taught for many years. (In fact, Clifton's

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<sup>1</sup> “blessing the boats” by Lucille Clifton from *Quilting: Poems 1987-1990*, BOA Editions, Ltd. Used by permission.

“blessing of the boats” is imprinted on the wall leading to the dining hall at the college.) What I love the most: that this is a poem of layered blessing—blessing of vessel, blessing of cargo, blessing of passage.

In a world that seems to value solution over exploration and certainty over curiosity, Clifton’s challenge to us is one requiring courage and one strengthened in faith as we turn our back to the wind we kissed. The poem is not only about boats and weather of course, but about people and life—people with fear, with doubt, people venturing into the vast and unknowable future. In this season of pandemic and crisis, a season indeed beyond the “lip of our understanding,” we “sail through this to that” amid turbulence and on seas as volatile as ever. May our eyes be opened to what blessing there is, that water waving forever.

Clifton’s work is often centered on themes concerning endurance in the face of hardship, strength in the face of fear. Though her poems sometimes focus more particularly on African-American and female experience, they are, at their core, of and about the *human* experience. In an interview published in the *Antioch Review*, Clifton explained that “writing is a way of continuing to hope ... a way of remembering I am not alone.” Scholars point out that her poetry is one of spaciousness and that she communicates more for saying less. One critic notes, “The first thing that strikes us about Lucille Clifton’s poetry [especially ‘blessing the boats’] is what is missing: capitalization, punctuation, long and plentiful lines. We see a poetry so pared down that its spaces take on substance, become a shaping presence as much as the words themselves.”

In that spirit of absence and becoming, spaciousness and deep missing, I am moved by poetry as a carrier for prayer. May you be well, you vessels of peace. May all that you carry be blessed. May your passage be gentle and charged with the holy. And may you endure a rough tide with grace, knowing mercy is real, and the shore near.

### ✚ About the poet

**Lucille Clifton** (1936-2010) was the first writer to have two books of poetry chosen as finalists for the Pulitzer Prize, *Good Woman: Poems and a Memoir, 1969-1980* (1987) and *Next: New Poems* (1987) and the first African-American recipient of the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize for lifetime achievement. She served as Maryland’s poet laureate from 1974 until 1985, and won the prestigious National Book Award for *Blessing the Boats: New and Selected Poems 1988-2000* (2000). She was a Distinguished Professor of Humanities at St. Mary’s College of Maryland and a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.



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