

# Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

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



## *Annunciation*

Even if I don't see it again—nor ever feel it  
I know it is—and that if once it hailed me  
it ever does—  
And so it is myself I want to turn in that direction  
not as towards a place, but it was a tilting  
within myself,  
as one turns a mirror to flash the light to where  
it isn't—I was blinded like that—and swam  
in what shone at me  
only able to endure it by being no one and so  
specifically myself I thought I'd die  
from being loved like that.

Marie Howe<sup>1</sup>

## Reflections

Some of you may have read or heard this poem before; St. Stephen's used it recently at a Celtic service and I have returned to it often since. It seems especially timely to reprint it now as we enter into Advent, a new year in the Christian calendar that marks a period of expectation, waiting, anxiety, and hope. It is in Advent that we recall the story of the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary, in which he says to her that she will conceive and mother the Son of God. Advent's story about a literal pregnancy parallels a more metaphoric pregnancy in which all of us are invited to think about what is yet to be, about what is difficult to imagine, and about what might be happening within us, coming to life.

This particular poem appears in a section of Howe's collection titled "Poems from the Life of Mary"; all the poems in this section are written in the voice of Mary but of course, as with all good art, careful attention rewards us in prismatic ways: not only do we consider Mary, but we are also led to reflect expansively in ways both outward and inward. This is a poem of intimacy and of silence, the self in dialogue with the soul; and so much of what the poem is *about* is concerned not only with what is not said, but also with what *cannot* be said.

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<sup>1</sup> "Annunciation" by Marie Howe from *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time*, W. W. Norton. Used by permission.

Annunciation means announcement. And this is an interesting lens to me. One thing I notice is that the poem both *is* an announcement and is also *about* an announcement. I read the poem with an eye towards the Christian story, of course, but I also think about the moment that one—anyone, each of us—is *told* something monumental, or that one *realizes*, or *accepts* her fate. For Mary, she is told—and she accepts—that she will give birth to Jesus. And in this moment—in addition to whatever fear and bewilderment she may feel—she also “thought [she’d] die / from being loved like that.” Mary accepts not only the certainty of her fate, but the certainty of herself being loved.

For each of us, it is worth considering those moments where we have realized—even if it means we are stunned, fearful, or bewildered by the news—that life from this moment on is forever changed. It strikes me that each life, if not each *day*, each *moment*, comes with a particular pregnancy, a weight of meaning and of possibility. Depending on your level of comfort with uncertainty, this might be a highly anxious-making idea or else one of optimism and hope for what comes next.

Whether this poem is one of anxiety, ecstasy, transformation, or revelation, it marks a moment in time where the speaker—Mary, in this case—becomes aware that her life is now changed. It speaks not only to women and to mothers, but to all people who have been faced with a reality that the world is a transformed place, that their lives are, at a moment’s notice, far different from what they had imagined. The joy and the fear of this news is something we all must, sooner or later, learn to reconcile.

### ✧ Other questions to consider

1. This poem is from a collection titled *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time* and for church-goers, “Ordinary Time” means something other than simply “common” or “unexceptional.” (This could be one definition of complexity, that a phrase is able to hold more than one meaning at once.) How do you respond to Howe’s mixing of the Ecclesiastical “Ordinary” and the literal “ordinary”? How does this poem intersect the sacred and the secular? In other words, where does mystery intersect the mundane?
2. Along these lines, what do you make of Mary’s “ordinariness”? What is it about her very ordinariness that makes her extraordinary?
3. Marie Howe’s poem uses an ambiguous “it”—there are five in the first three lines alone—and as readers we are asked to consider what “it” might be. “It” remains unidentified but is something this speaker *knows*: “Even if I don’t see it again—nor ever feel it / I know it is.” And later we read that Mary is “only able to endure it by being no one and so / specifically myself...” What is the thing Mary must endure? Are you able to name what “it” is? How can something be at once inexpressible but *not* unknowable?
4. The knowledge—the conviction—about what *is* (“and that if once it hailed me / it ever does,”) convinces Mary that she is “loved like that.” But, loved like *how*? What do you think this kind of love has to do with Advent, with waiting, with hope?

## ✧ Writing in response

1. This poem might be considered one of dialogue between the self and the soul. While there is likely an enormity of material that cannot be expressed, perhaps there is something you can articulate. Write a dialogue — yourself speaking to yourself—and then see if you can determine if one voice feels closer to the soul than the other. You might think about the exterior version of you— what others might expect you to say—and the interior, real you, where the soul lives. What kind of conversation can happen?
2. Consider a time when something was “announced” to you that changed the trajectory of your life forever. Write a poem about the before and after of this moment—your own Annunciation—remembering that silence is a great instructor and that negative space is itself pregnant with possibility.
3. Whether you have literally given birth to a child or not, we have all “birthed” something metaphorically: an idea, a poem, a garden, a painting. You might think about a song, for example, only being born when it is sung. Write about this experience of giving life to something. What if the title of your reflection is “Advent”? Does that “birth” a new idea for you?

## ✧ About the poet

Marie Howe currently serves on the writing faculties at Sarah Lawrence College, New York University, and Columbia University. She is the author of three collections of poetry, most recently *In the Kingdom of Ordinary Time*, as well as co-editor of the essay anthology *In the Company of My Solitude: American Writing from the AIDS Pandemic*. She has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the Academy of American Poets. She served as Poet Laureate of New York State from 2012 to 2014.



### **Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey**

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