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The Quaker Poet in Community

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“It is difficult / to get the news from poems,” wrote the poet William Carlos Williams sixty years ago, “yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there.” His point, I believe, is that poetry matters; that it is not *frivolous*.

I take comfort in his words, since historically Quakers have not been champions of the frivolous. We try to do things that matter. But how does a Quaker poet today do good and Friendly service in the place where he or she is situated—*situated* in both the inner and outer sense, the spiritual and physical? More simply, what is the role of the Quaker poet in community?

A look at our Quaker history is less helpful than one would like: I’m sure it never occurred to the *poet* John Greenleaf Whittier that his poems might *not* matter, any more than it would have occurred to the *political lobbyist* Whittier or the *journeyman journalist* Whittier. After all, he used his verse to sway popular thought.

That’s a concept impossible to suggest now, given poetry’s lack of any popular presence. Poetry today inhabits a much diminished cultural position. The functions once performed by poetry in mainstream culture are fulfilled by other arts and media—by popular songs, novels, op-ed pieces, movies, talk radio, television, and the ubiquitous Netflix.

Since the avenue of poetry as a broadly circulating popular medium is gone,

today Quaker poets must rethink, and possibly re-invent, the role of their work in our communities: as Quaker poets, as champions in plain coats of the frivolous, where and how do we serve?

Thankfully poetry does maintain a few niches in our culture. With no intention of being comprehensive, I offer you three that I think recommend themselves to consideration by Friends.

Niche #1: Let’s start with self-discovery: the examined life. Such helping folks as teachers, spiritual directors, and counselors continue to direct their students or clients to write out their feelings in poetry. Contemporary free verse, with its apparent lack of any necessary craft, lends itself to such exploration, and sometimes the results are good. They perform a helpful and necessary function for the growth of individuals; but generally these “poems” find that their best or only audience is an audience of one or two. So how might a Quaker poet minister in such community settings?

Very well, I believe. As teachers who help students find a voice for dreams and fears, as spiritual directors who help directees look closely at their own souls, as counselors who help clients make sense of their past, their present, and their full potential, a Quaker poet may readily find opportunity for ministry. The Quaker teacher, spiritual director, or counselor skilled in the techniques of poetic discovery can be a Friendly paraclete who helps self-discovery

happen. The actual poetic *craft* in such contexts comes to the fore as we teach the invention skills, the exploratory methods, the powers of figurative comparison, the surprising recognitions in narrative form, even the places of non-judgmental expression—any and all techniques that open the way for everyday miracles.

Niche #2: At the opposite end of the spectrum stands the persistent place of poetry in the rarified air of high art. When poetry ceased to be a popular form, it became the stuff of specialists, and its techniques changed utterly. As a result, what may seem to the uninitiated like the craftless expression of free verse is often, in fact, following complex principles that could never have been conceived by Whittier or, for that matter, Shakespeare. The inevitable result is that high art poetry is now the stuff of universities, devotees with carefully developed tastes, and other poets. Much of such work is difficult, even off-puttingly so; simultaneously, the more easily accessible and gratifying aspects of poetic craft have fallen away. That isn't bad and it isn't good. It simply is.

How does the Quaker poet find a way to contribute to, to serve in, that high art milieu? The most obvious answer is difficult but clear: if serious poetry is your gift and passion, you do your art, and you earn your status in that community. The Quaker poet can and should play a role in that world, practicing her craft with excellence and rigor, just as a Quaker painter or composer practices her craft among her fellow experts. Even with professional success, of course, the community served will be small; but that doesn't

mean that the art doesn't bear cultural significance.

Niche #3: A third community that can be served by the Quaker poet is the remnant of a popular audience. When poetry is published by *Christian Century* or *Friends Journal*, the editors are banking on the fact that just as some of us go *occasionally* to a gallery or hear a symphony, some of us *occasionally* read poetry. The remnant may be few, but that doesn't mean the ministry shouldn't be offered to such a community. What the poet must keep in mind for ministry in this community, however, is that readers must be able to access and enjoy what the work offers. The poem must be something more craft-rich than therapy; and, simultaneously, it must be more accessible than what is offered by the most craft-intensive high art.

As I think about the potential role for the Quaker poet in these communities, I'm struck by the strangeness of our particular art form in this particular time. Is contemporary free verse a craftless mode of freewriting for self-discovery? Or is it an extremely complex and subtle, and occasionally inaccessible, art form? Or may it be a way of bringing some aesthetic bliss or deep insight to a more or less general population? Considering such a quandary, I'm struck by that same question every free-verse poet has fielded from some well meaning student or reader or listener:

What makes that stuff you do poetry?

It's a legitimate question.

If free verse apparently fulfills no easily defined standard of craft—no rhyme, no regular meter, no prescriptive form—

what makes any offered page of language a poem?

Here's my current answer, dogmatic as it may appear. As it happens, I think my answer comes from a place where my Quakerism and my craft converge. So let me offer my own quirky, but much obsessed upon, standards.

Delight. To begin, a poem must call special attention to itself *as language*, and the attention paid must reward the reader with delight in that language. If meaning is all that I gather from having read a particular chunk of language, it's not a poem.

If that sounds dogmatic, it may be saved from the most horrific narrowness by this fact: language may delight in myriad ways, ways that are very traditional (like rhyme, meter, and figures of speech), contemporary (like the position of the words on the page, line breaks that play against syntax, intentional ambiguity, or the subtle musicality of vowels), or radically innovative (like those I've not thought of yet). If a chunk of language says, "Look at me! I give you delight by my own, uh, something-or-other," then that chunk of language has met the most essential demand of poetry.

But a poem must be more than craft that leads to delight. Poetry is, in the broadest possible sense, *spiritual*. On some deep level, you all know: there are phenomena we cannot analyze empirically, but which have been important to humans of many cultures and many ages and which, right now, you share, to one degree or another, with everyone you know and don't know. Such phenomena are spiritual, and they are the very stuff of much of the best

poetry. Even when it doesn't seem like it.

Now I'll become still more prescriptive. In addition to the delight factor, a poem must allow the reader to experience one of these three qualities: identification, transcendence, and epiphany. And yes, these qualities often overlap and ultimately become a little hazy.

Identification. This quality is, I think, the one that happens most frequently in a good contemporary poem. By *identification*, I mean that the poem must make the reader feel something in common with the experience of the implied speaker. I think of this as the *ain't-that-just-the-way-it-is* factor. At their best, poems can communicate something true and meaningful about your own experience of life as lived. Maybe you identify with the anger, or the joy, or the lousy tricks experience plays on a person.

Sometimes the lightning strike of identification in a poem may simply be, "Yes, I feel the same way when the sky looks like that in the morning." Or, "Yes, I feel the same way when I run across my grandma's high school photographs." Or "Yes, I feel that same isolated, lost-in-the-world way when my cell phone dies in the airport." The intensity of the emotion, the importance of the predicament, the weightiness of the topic—those things don't necessarily matter. What matters is the "I feel the same way. . . ." part. That means that the poem has struck upon something true about the broader human condition, often in an unprecedented way. And because the feeling takes us outside ourselves and situates us deeper in a

common humanity, it's what I consider a spiritual experience.

Transcendence. *Transcendence* can be an intimidating term, but needn't be. In its most basic definition, to transcend means this: to cross a boundary. Sometimes a poem may be rambling on about something perfectly mundane—cooking squash, waiting for a traffic light to change, fishing without catching fish, etc. But by the time you get to the end of the poem, and often right at the end of the poem (maybe on the third reading), you realize that there's an abundance of significance, a *spiritual* significance, in that mundane event.

A boundary has been crossed: you thought you were just tasting a delightful stew of language apparently about waiting on a traffic light, but somewhere you began to sense that you, along with the poem's speaker, were struggling against the very nature of the human relationship with the disheveled reality of place or time . . . or something like that. Often you *feel* the transcendence first, before you verbalize it. And in fact, nothing says that as a writer or reader you ever have to verbalize it *at all*--or even fully make sense of it. You know that *something is there*, that the poem has significance that crosses a boundary from the mundane matters of the flesh to the extraordinary matters of the spirit. You've been processing particulars, but experiencing universals—something more deeply, more meaningfully human, than waiting to turn off the burner or try another artificial bait or punch the accelerator pedal.

Epiphany. In literary criticism an "epiphany" is a moment of sudden understanding. But in the Christian

tradition, an epiphany is the appearance of God (in one form or another). Some poems are accounts of epiphanies, and if the poem does its job well, readers not only understand the account presented but have an insinuation of the epiphany itself. One needn't hold particular—or, indeed, any—religious views to appreciate the poem as a piece of art that relates an experience the speaker perceives as an appearance of God. But I suspect that poems with the quality of epiphany are most easily enjoyed by people who themselves have some belief in the possibility of divine encounter.

It may seem that epiphany poems would be extraordinarily rare. And if the only poems we could classify as *epiphany* were those relating the first-person experiences of wrestling with angels, such would be the case. But that's not quite what I'm suggesting. Think of Ralph Waldo Emerson suddenly feeling at one with the universe while stepping in a mud puddle on Harvard Square, Walt Whitman seeing the mysteries of the universe displayed in a spear of summer grass, or Mary Oliver hearing a perfect prayer in a flock of terns. These things fall under my category of epiphany—a deep-felt experience of the Divine in the commonplace.

In summary then, these are three ways I believe that the Quaker who ministers through poetry can serve her communities:

(1) She can, if her gifts allow, use the powers of poetry to teach people new and expedient ways of wisdom-nurturing self-exploration and healthy self-expression;

(2) She can, if her gifts allow, take her place in the "high art" world of serious poetry and do so with a Quaker sensibility that bears weight in intellectual culture; and

(3) She can, if her gifts allow, speak to a popular audience with good, gratifying, accessible poems.

Through creative work that offers delight and that faithfully offers the experience of identification, transcendence, or epiphany, the Quaker poet can minister to a community or communities. We will never have Whittier's broad audience, but there's

nothing *frivolous* about our work—despite the fact that it doesn't give anyone the news. For some of us, it's even a calling.

Works Cited

Williams, William Carlos. "[Asphodel, That Greeny Flower.](#)" *poets.org*. Academy of American Poets. Internet. August 27, 2015.