

Skeleton Architecture of Our Lives: A Bridge Across Our Fears
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From Margaret Atwood, this poem is called UP:
You wake up filled with dread.
There seems no reason for it.
Morning light sifts through the window,
there is birdsong,
you can't get out of bed.

It's something about the crumpled sheets
hanging over the edge like jungle
foliage, the terry slippers gaping
their dark pink mouths for your feet,
the unseen breakfast--some of it
in the refrigerator you do not dare
to open--you do not dare to eat.

What prevents you? The future. The future tense,
immense as outer space.
You could get lost there.
No. Nothing so simple. The past, its destiny
and drowned events pressing you down,
like sea water, like gelatin
filling your lungs instead of air.

Forget that and let's get up.
Try moving your arm.
Try moving your head.
Pretend the house is on fire
and you must run or burn.
No, that one's useless.
It's never worked before.

Where is it coming from, this echo,
this huge No that surrounds you,
silent as the folds of the yellow
curtains, mute as the cheerful

Mexican bowl with its cargo
of mummified flowers?
(You chose the colours of the sun,
not the dried neutrals of shadow.
God knows you've tried.)

Now here's a good one:
You're lying on your deathbed.
You have one hour to live.
Who is it, exactly, you have needed
all these years to forgive?

This is one of those big poems! It encompasses so much but I am particularly captivated by the part about the future. Did you catch it? "What prevents you?" Atwood asks and then answers, "The future...The past, its destiny...like sea water, like gelatin filling your lungs instead of air."

Tina's all ages reflection helps me see how commonly we all use metaphor. And certainly they abound in the realm of the poet; Destiny like sea water, says Atwood. Audre Lorde, in the quote that Cathy shared earlier, also employs the metaphorical language of poetry to address the future. "Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before."

I think what this bridge metaphor could mean, especially to Lorde as a black writer, feminist, womanist, lesbian, and civil rights activist who was not often safe or comfortable in this culture, is that poetry can help us create our future by connecting our reality to what we expect or desire to come next. Poetry infuses art into life, or maybe it just calls us to see that life is inherently artistic and artful; and so, enhanced by metaphor, poetry can expand our understanding of life.

Before we go too much farther, let's just get one thing out of the way; not everyone is a poetry person. I'm sure some of you might be thinking that a poem here or there is palatable...but a whole service?! Maybe poems aren't your cup of tea. That's fine, but I will say that poetry sometimes gets a bad rap for being too flowery and complicated—dream and vision totally unanchored from reality and common sense. It's not like science, which Tina describes as able to definitively explain things like the weather. Poetry can be a little hard to pin down.

Someone recently said to me that poetry makes them tense because figuring out what the poet means is so challenging. How do we know what we are supposed to take away? Probably this is related to why someone else mentioned soon after that they especially relish hearing poetry from the original author. Our glimpse of that today came when Cathy gave us context about the original piece she shared. There's no denying the satisfaction of the clearly stated; it's a poem about her son who hates piano and it's called *For My Son, Who Hates Piano*.

Czeslaw Milosz gives us another example of such directness when he says, "The purpose of poetry is to remind us how difficult it is to remain just one person, [and then he gets a little flowery:] for our house is open, there are no keys in the doors, and invisible guests come in and out at will." Milosz himself was definitely more than one person if the label applies to anyone. The Polish poet was also a prose writer, Warsaw anti-Nazi resistance fighter, translator, high level diplomat and eventually U.S. citizen.

Similarly to how it is difficult to remain just one person, it's even harder for a poem to have just one meaning. Cathy's poem obviously means something specific to her but as soon as she reads it to us it we get to filter it through our specific truths. Not only do we get to, we actually cannot avoid doing so. We are bound to hear in it truths different than hers.

For no reason I can fathom Cathy's poem brings to my mind a family friend. She was my dad's college student and used to babysit my sister and me. Now, even though she's grown up with her

own family, we maintain close ties. Is the connection that she plays the piano? Who knows? But when I think of her a powerful memory arises of her oldest child tentatively sounding out a brand new word (S-O-A-P...Soap!) while his parents and I cheered. I doubt this anecdote is relevant to Cathy (why would it be?) but for me the recollection is a gift of her poetry.

This is part of poetry's purpose, the very reason why we might bother with poems at all. It's the bridge, Lorde would say, the bridge to each other, to our histories and to whatever will come next.

A sense of the past is foundational to any future-gazing endeavor. The origin story for this service starts last spring at the Fellowship's annual question box service. For those of you who haven't attended one, our tradition is for folks to jot down questions about anything they've been wondering and on which they think their minister might have an interesting perspective. Instead of delivering a prepared sermon, the minister responds spontaneously to as many questions as time allows.

Rather than the unfortunate know-it-all/stump-the-minister vibe these services often have at other congregations (which causes many of my colleagues to hate this format), at this Fellowship I have been struck by how deeply the questions dive into the real and hard issues of life. Usually the themes are ones I care immensely about but have no definitive conclusions. You know, the kind of stuff poets write about.

Last spring, all three services produced one or more different questions about spiritual practice. *What is a spiritual practice? How do you get one? Why would you want to? and How do I know if one would help me or if I'm doing it right?*

These questions became the theme for our Wellspring Wednesday adult education program, a spiritual practice survey course. I recently offered one about poetry as my spiritual practice but the next two we have coming up are about prayer as a spiritual practice with Rev. Kathleen Rolenz on March 1st and photography as a spiritual practice with member Mary Ellyn Vicksta on March 8th.

Here's my take on spiritual practice and what it means: Spirituality is about living out the idea that we are connected to something bigger than ourselves. It's a universal human experience, something that touches us all. That's the spiritual part.

Practice is also an interesting concept to consider: I (well, ok, the dictionary) defines it in two ways; first, as the actual application or use of an idea, belief, or method, and, secondly, as a repetitious activity or skill for the purpose of acquiring or maintaining proficiency at it.

Now, not every pastime is a spiritual practice because not every activity helps cultivate spiritual development. How can you tell if it does? My colleague the Rev. Meredith Garmon says that some indications of developing spiritually include:

- » more connection with others and nature;
- » more episodes of overwhelming appreciation;
- » decisions flow more from intention or spontaneity and less from fears based on past experience;
- » less investment in conflict and judgment (of self and others);
- » more genuine curiosity;
- » bigger capacity to love without expecting anything in return;
- » growing awareness of kindness offered;
- » and more interest in extending kindness to others.

He says that if you find a routine that helps you have more of these benefits, then doing it might be spiritual practice for you. I believe that an activity is more likely to work as spiritual practice if you engage it in each of these three ways:

1. with the intention or goal of cultivating spiritual development
2. with a collective, relational element (like doing it as part of a group, or with some sense of connection to your ancestors or other people)
3. with regularity; that you have a recognizable pattern (like attending worship weekly or making art daily)

When asked about spiritual practice at the question box service I shared about my own. It's simple. Every day I read one poem. This humble habit has taken different phases and shapes across the years I've been doing it. In college, when I was coming to terms with anger as a normal (sometimes even helpful!) emotion I found myself drawn to the furious, bleak "screw you, cruel world!" type of poetry—ok, I still have a spot for it if truth be told.

Yet lately I am finding a lot of satisfaction in poetry that celebrates or maybe even just notices the soft and the mundane, like Tina skiing or that phrase of Cathy's about waiting in the car during her son's lesson. I don't know why that part got me but I found it very moving to imagine her patiently waiting to drive him on to the next part of their day. I love those moments when the unremarkable gives way to a mystical overarching vision of the future that Milosz might characterize as hosting those invisible guests who come in and out of our open house at will.

Lorde's metaphor, of course, is that the daily poems I encounter are my bridge. They link my ordinary reality to the words on the page or screen to the future of my unfolding day and then to the expanded horizon that is one of poetry's best legacies. Poetry is a bridge that accepts us wherever we are and then takes us forward.

Linda Pastan is a poet with unique qualifications to weigh in on the future. As a young adult she was an acclaimed writer, even beating out Sylvia Plath for a *Mademoiselle* poetry prize. However, she decided to give up writing poetry in order to concentrate on raising her family. After ten years at home, her husband urged her to return to poetry. Since the early 1970s, Pastan has reflected on quiet, everyday themes. She is interested in the anxieties that exist under the surface of normal life, maybe because she gave up a future in poetry for everyday life and then circled back around to a brand new future; more poetry.

Besides, deep down, aren't we all a little anxious about the normal and the every day, and its unwritten future? If we are lucky, poetry or some other beautiful and mysterious force might help us not quite alleviate our anxieties but perhaps face them chin up and heart out, knowing that we are not without a bridge to draw us into the future. Pastan's reflection on this is called *A New Poet*:

Finding a new poet
is like finding a new wildflower
out in the woods. You don't see

its name in the flower books, and
nobody you tell believes
in its odd color or the way

its leaves grow in splayed rows
down the whole length of the page. In fact
the very page smells of spilled

red wine and the mustiness of the sea
on a foggy day - the odor of truth
and of lying.

And the words are so familiar,
so strangely new, words
you almost wrote yourself, if only

in your dreams there had been a pencil
or a pen or even a paintbrush,
if only there had been a flower.

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