

Expressing the Inexpressible

In 1996 the Academy of American Poets established April as National Poetry Month. There are a number of poetry websites that will send you a different poem each day during the month of April. Until a substitute teacher came into my tenth grade English class, I had no interest in poetry. The one photocopied poem that this teacher brought in, and that our class read and discussed, dramatically changed my appreciation of poetry. Suddenly I was very interested in it. I found the language bursting with life and energy, with music and humor too.

The lack of interest in poetry is not unusual. Poetry books barely sell. However, I think that so often what we appreciate and don't appreciate and how, in general, we relate to something is dependent on what we understand that thing to be. For example, I think that too often people's ideas about God get in the way of their potential to connect with God. Similarly, I think people's assumptions about poetry often get in their way of recognizing that poetry is all around us. The great English poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772 – 1834) defined poetry as “the best words in their best order.” The great French philosopher, Voltaire (1697 – 1778) said of poetry that it is “the music of the soul, and, above all, of great and feeling souls.”

Like all language, poetry tries to communicate. At times it strives to express what often is close to inexpressible. The greatest prayers are often a form of poetry. They too, at their most sublime, attempt to articulate that which is beyond words. Yet we often feel a need to express what is inside us. When we feel moved by love, beauty, or compassion, we often need to find words that release those powerful feelings into the world. Maybe our expressing them can sensitize another person to those experiences.

A large part of the Jewish prayer book consists of Psalms and adaptations of Psalms (and other parts of the Hebrew Bible) adapted as prayers. The Hebrew word for Psalm is *tehillah* whose root means “to praise.” A Psalm is literally a song or poem of praise. Many parts of the Psalms are beautiful poems whose words contain both a musical power and ideas that express humans’ connection with God. That musical element of the language also gives poetry a power that it would not otherwise have. Music alone, even without words, often deeply moves us. Certain sounds themselves foster moods and can transport us or convey feelings that we find difficult to capture in words. Exposing ourselves to great poetry, music, art, or nature, I believe, can refine our inner life, enable us to feel more deeply, and appreciate life more fully. Prayer should do this too. The prayers that speak to me the most are those that express praise of God. They function to cultivate our spiritual “senses,” to open ourselves to both what is deepest within us and to the miracle of life itself.

The prayers in a prayer book are fixed, which presents both a gift and a challenge. The gift is the words that possibly are more transporting than those we might compose ourselves, words that echo parts of the Bible. The challenge, however, is when words become too familiar they can degenerate into things we pronounce, but don’t put our souls into. They can become rote and lifeless. However, they also can become the opposite with the familiarity of usage. The more we absorb those prayers into ourselves the more they can truly be a vehicle for our souls. Psalm 69:14 in Hebrew says “*va’ani tefillati l’kha*” which is conventionally translated as: “As for me, may my prayer come to You.” However, it could equally be understood to mean: “And I am my prayer (to you),” in other words our lives can become like a prayer, like a song or poem of praise to the Eternal One. Being able to maintain this balance between familiarity and freshness is critical for a healthy prayer life.

Prayers can both articulate our highest aspirations and help us hold in our consciousness our ideals, keep us aware of what is eternal, what has depth rather than the shallow things that can often consume our time. Great poems do that too. As Voltaire said “poetry is the music of the soul.” People often turn to poetry when trying to concisely articulate very powerful emotions and moments in their lives. People will look to poetry at wedding ceremonies or at funerals. Economy of language, that is, the ability to say a lot in a minimum of words, is another characteristic of poetry. It’s important not to narrowly define what is poetry, or prayer, or “religion”, for that matter. We would do well to recognize that gratitude, and appreciation of life, is a very holy state of mind, even when it does not appear to fit in the conventional framework of “religion.” Poetry, music, and prayer, among other paths, can all open us to that place of wonder.