

Poetry is Essential

Eugene Peterson³

Isn't it odd that pastors, who are responsible for interpreting the Scriptures, so much of which comes in the form of poetry, have so little interest in poetry? It is a crippling defect and must be remedied. The Christian communities as a whole must rediscover poetry, and the pastors must lead them. Poetry is essential to the pastoral vocation because poetry is original speech. The word is creative: it brings into being what was not there before—perception, relationship, belief. Out of the silent abyss a sound is formed: people hear what was not heard before and are changed by the sound from loneliness into love. Out of the blank abyss a picture is formed by means of metaphor: people see what they did not see before and are changed by the image from anonymity into love. Words create. God's word creates; our words can participate in the creation.

[Jesus said,] "We're not keeping secrets, we're telling them; we're not hiding things, we're bringing them out into the open.

"Are you listening to this?

"Really listening?"

MARK 4:22-23

³ Eugene H. Peterson, *Living the Messages, Daily Help for Living the God-Centered Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 204-205.

Poetry, the Language of the Soul

Poetry. Why poetry? Is poetry of any value? How important is poetry in understanding the Bible? What role does poetry play in knowing God? What role did poetry play for the ancient Israelites? What role has it had in the history of the church? Scholars tell us that over thirty percent of the Hebrew Scripture is poetry. Man's first speech recorded in Genesis 2:23 is an exquisite poem of appreciation and praise. It contains alliteration, assonance, meter, pun, rhyme, parallelism, chiasm and recapitulation all densely packed into two lines:

This one at last, bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh,
This one shall be called Woman,
for from man was this one taken. (Gen 2:23)⁴

Man's very first recorded words are a poem celebrating the gift of woman. No other form of speech would do! Exuberant lines spill over with exultation. Consider Israel's sweet singer, David, the newly anointed king. His life is so dangerously close to death, he is forced to seek refuge in a cave (1 Sam 22:1-5). There, in that dark pit lined with bat dung, he feels compelled to take the time to compose several poems. One of those poems, Psalm 34, a skillfully constructed acrostic, has become a timeless expression of true spirituality to countless generations:

I sought the LORD, and he answered me,
And from all my fears, he delivered me.
They looked to him and were radiant,
And their faces shall never be ashamed. (Ps 34:4-5)

What drives this hunted youth to create a poem when his life is but a slippery step from Saul's demon tipped spear? Or consider again, why is it that every time God speaks to man in direct address, the literary form is the poem? Why is it that when a priest prays, a sage speaks, a prophet delivers his oracle, or the psalmist sings his lament or praise, the vehicle is the sacred poem? Why did the Ancients value the poem so highly and use it so profusely? What is it about poetry that our forefathers made it their chief instrument to express their deepest yearnings to God in worship? What made the poem an apt tool for shepherds and sages of Israel to instruct their holy congregations?

It is even more important to ask, what has happened in our modern culture that the poem has become all but extinct? Has our fast-paced information age devalued the time needed for reflection, or have we struck down the poem as archaic, obsolete and esoteric? What price have we paid to neglect man's highest form of speech? What does modern man do with his meditations, musings, and internal melodies? Where do his frustrations and aches, bewilderment and pain find expression? Where does man give voice to his unspeakable grief? Can wounds heal without acknowledgment and public expression? Without speech to articulate the tensions that lie within, what outlets are left? We have traded the time-honored holy stage of communal worship for the isolation of the therapist's office or even worse, the public striptease of talk shows. And if these avenues fail, the only recourse left to vent our seething frustrations is the non-language of violence.

Perhaps we are such a violent generation because we are, in part, the *inarticulate* generation. Can we not rediscover from our forefathers this missing link on the path to healing and health, as the way to be integrated and true, to be whole and holy?

⁴ Robert Alter, *Genesis, Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 10.

My journey into the power of the poem began in the summer of 1988 in the land of the poets, Romania. There I had a surprising encounter with a poet who had spent sixteen years in prison and composed 4,500 poems to Christ. He was one of a few of his generation to survive under the cruel regime of an anti-Christ. Every man I met, who had spent time in prison with Traian Dorz, told me with tears in his eyes that those were the happiest days of his life. By 1988 300,000 Romanians were singing his songs. I'll never forget the experience of first hearing those poetic cadences drawing us up the mountain to God. It was like entering the chariot of Elijah, each verse carrying me higher and higher into heaven, until at last I found myself hushed with holy fear under the wings of the cherubim. We were drenched in humility.

Returning home, I came to treasure the poem and to recognize its power to unlock grief in the soul. Like David, I learned to write my own laments, processing the grief over the death of my first two children and sharing them with the congregation. Then I encouraged (even coerced) many in the congregation to write their own poems of lament and offer them publicly as an act of worship. Our experiences, rather than being a litany of morbid dirges, became unforgettable moments united in sacred love. Fragmented people were integrated into reality, to one another and to God. After experiencing the poem's power, David's lament over Jonathan (2 Sam 1:17-27) began to answer many of my questions as to how and why the poem is such an effective tool to process grief. Embracing this poem became a touchstone for my soul, coalescing countless channels of Divine love and sacred memories from divergent lands and distant ages.

The poem then planted itself in foreign soil of a church dominated by engineers. There it sprouted and was strangely treasured. It became the time-honored vehicle that unlocked wells of hidden grief for the loss of my children and a channel for those elusive waters to reach the throne of God. A son dies, and the poem becomes the only language capable of recapturing the holy memory of God's penetrating presence in the hour of a son's death. The gift of the poem multiplied beyond measure to anyone and everyone. Countless folks were challenged to share their story, write 'their' poem (whether a lamentation, thanksgiving or praise) and offer it publicly as an act of worship in community. These poems with their innumerable holy encounters became museums of sacred memories. We have traveled in teams on the wings of the poem and were never disappointed as the poem led us to the deepest wells, where love gushed forth filling every crack.

This journey was not pre-planned, but was one of those great blessings in life, designed by a gracious God who delights in giving gifts to us before we know we need them, and even before we ask. As we continue to unwrap the gift over time, its treasure becomes even more precious to us.

I would like to express appreciation to my friend John Felstiner, Stanford professor of English and poetry, who spent sixteen years translating the poems of Paul Celan, a survivor of the Holocaust. His book, *Paul Celan, Poet, Survivor, Jew*⁵ has given me countless insights into the nature of poetry and its function to verbalize indescribable grief. Endless thanks also goes to Dr. Bruce Waltke, whose has generously shared with me the treasures of the Hebrew poets and has been a mentor to me for over thirty years.

⁵ John Felstiner, *Paul Celan, Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).



Cheek to Cheek

How are poets born? Where does poetry begin? When does one cross that threshold to ache for a voice shaped by that other world? When does one take the plunge in search of metaphors and images to lay beauty bare and capture the eternal walking in the mud? Does the poet sign up for the venture, or does the poem seek him while he sleeps? Is he the hunter or the hunted? Of the many paths up this mountain, mine was not unlike Pablo Neruda's.

And I was at that age...Poetry arrived
in search of me...I don't know, I don't where
it came from, from winter or a river
I don't know how or when
no, they were not voices, they were not
words nor silence,
but from a street I was summoned,
from the branches of night,
abruptly from the others,
among violent fires,
or returning alone,
there I was without a face and it touched me.

Pablo Neruda

I was that age, thirty-seven, when poetry arrived. Through an impenetrable mystery I was plunged into the unspeakable songs of a poet. I did not know where they came from, but there were voices, a multitude of them. In every resonant syllable of a language I could not yet understand I "felt a grim energy verging on elation."⁶

Those songs inside the window,
songs that magnify the Light,
those songs inside the window,
haunt my soul this very night.

Somewhere on the outskirts of hell a poet had shaped the soul of a nation to sing. The place was România and the year 1988. For decades an entire population had been ravaged,

⁶ Felstiner's description of "becoming conversant" with the poetry of Paul Celan, another Romanian poet. Felstiner, *Paul Celan, Poet, Survivor, Jew*, xix.

raped and left to grope alone in the darkness. Speaking of his birth Dorz wrote, “*When I was born with this body among you, there was cloud and night and winter and war.*”⁷ Working in this wasteland, God gave him a voice that contained a rare light to break through the silent suffering and violent fires of the oppressor. So powerful were his poems the Securitate brutally confiscated every page of them, piled them in an oxcart and burned them before his eyes. Then, they imprisoned the poet. But they could not silence his voice.

Over the next seventeen years of imprisonment, house arrest and brutal torture Traian Dorz worked with relentless energy. Equipped with only his memory, a glass shard for a pallet, lime and spittle as his paint, and a matchstick for a brush, he resurrected his poems from the ash heap; some 4,500 poems! And, just as in the David story, this poet “would have the last word, not to mention the silence after.”⁸ Ceausescu, the dictator, and Traian Dorz both died in 1989. Ceausescu has no lasting legacy from his fleeting, vulgar shadow, but today, hundreds of thousands of Romanians sing Dorz’s immortal songs as the sacred expression of their worship. Hearing them for the first time, I felt that I was transported to another place and time where one touches the face of the Holy.

And then I met the man. It was a warm summer evening in Cluj.⁹ I had returned from a secret meeting, full of song and Spirit and entered my host’s home. As I opened the door to my room, I saw him standing there. He was a man of small stature but he possessed a powerful presence; a peasant yet a king. Here was a man who endured more suffering and swallowed more evil than I could comprehend. Seeing him, I felt conflicting emotions warring within me. Repelled by my own sense of unworthiness, I felt like dust on the scale, and at the same time, I was drawn by a holy love. He took me into his arms, looked deep into my eyes and said, “*You teach about the cross....we live under the cross.*” Then he gently pressed his cheek to mine and prayed for me. I needed no translation. He prayed that I might know something of the unspeakable love of Christ *he* had experienced in *his* suffering. The words rolled off his tongue in dream like cadences. The soft timbre of his voice and those pulsating rhythms seized me and tore my heart like water.

That one touch was all I would ever experience from the poet. But it was all I needed. I woke up in the middle of night weeping and asked God to give me something of the spirit of this man. Returning home on the train, I had a strange sensation that I had been a secret witness of one of the most precious spiritual creations on the planet. This poet was the Solzhenitsyn of România. Buried deep within my sleeping bag was one of his “forbidden” hymnals of a thousand songs. I smuggled it out with a promise that we would try to publish it and smuggle more copies back into the country. How? I had no idea.

Having been touched by the poet, strong relational ties began between our church and with the poet’s spiritual sons and daughters that make up the *Lord’s Army*. Over the next eighteen years we made over a dozen trips into Romania, conducted countless conferences and discipleship seminars, and witnessed two weddings. The Lord’s Army took one of our favorite sons as their own in 1992 and returned the favor in 2006, by giving us one of their choicest “daughters” in marriage. On the tenth anniversary of my meeting with Traian Dorz, I wrote the following poem in appreciation to God for the poet, the poem, and his people.

⁷ Traian Dorz was born December 25, 1914.

⁸ John Felstiner’s description of the figure Shulammitte in Paul Celan’s poem “*Deathfugue*”, *Paul Celan, Poet, Survivor, Jew*, 41.

⁹ The exact date was Tuesday, July 19, 1988.

Time Beneath His Shadow

Ten years,
it seems like yesterday,
when at night I was cast into his arms,
cheek to cheek,
to hear the soft timbre of his voice,
those pulsating rhythms,
that seized me and tore my heart like water.

Ten years is but a day
beneath the shadow of the poet
to stare deep into the purest eyes
of humble men, frail dust,
sacred sons,
with not a word to give or raise,
but to silent know,
now my soul,
strangely knit to theirs like one.

Ten years, a swift wind,
like the blink of an eye
to frame a window
around those four voiced angels
of Vecernie's beckoning song,
to hold their vibrating notes forever,
and touch their faces long.

Ten years, not one day
did I hasten to stay, but flew away
every night like a bird
to those secret Carpathian heights,
your spine and ridge to lift me,
your valleys to swallow me
in the dew soaked verdant green,
I feel you now in my every breath,
I see you in the splendor of the moon,
and in the nighttime shadows and airy stillness
that bequeaths that rare quiet to my soul.

Ten years I solely seek you
as each day and night abide,
ten years searching for my father's well again,
like a lost forsaken lover seeks his holy bride.

Ten years, one touch, cheek to cheek,
and now I live forever in that timeless space
beneath the shadow of the poet.

Poets on Poetry

Edward Hirsch¹⁰

The deepest spirit of poetry is awe.
Poetry is a way of inscribing that feeling of awe.
I don't think we should underestimate the capacity
for tenderness that poetry opens within us.

“Roots and wings,”
the Spanish poet Juan Ramon writes,
“But let the wings take root
and the roots fly.”

I am shocked by what I see in the poem
but also by what the poem finds in me.
it activates my secret world,
commands my inner life.
I am pried open.

Shelley says that
“Poetry redeems from decay
the visitations of the divinity
in man.”





Stanley Kunitz

Poetry is the most difficult, the most solitary,
and the most life-enhancing thing
that one can do in the world.
The experience of love and the creative act
are the supreme expressions of the life force.
They do more than express it;
they refresh and renew it and give it back, magnified.¹¹

¹⁰ Edward Hirsch, *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1999).

¹¹ Gary Pacernick, *Meaning and Memory, Interviews with Fourteen Jewish Poets* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2001), 38.

The Most a Poem Can Do: Bringing Four Worlds Together

<i>ES STAND</i> THERE STOOD <i>der Feigensplitter auf deiner Lippe,</i>	a splinter of fig on your lip,		<i>the natural world of creation</i>
<i>es stand</i> there stood <i>Jerusalem um uns,</i>	Jerusalem around us,		<i>the spiritual world</i>
<i>es stand</i> there stood <i>der Hellkiefernduft</i>	the bright pine scent		<i>the political/historical world</i>
<i>überm Danenschiff, dem wir dankten,</i>	above the Danish skiff we thanked,		
<i>ich stand</i> I stood <i>in dir.</i> in you.			<i>the personal world</i>

John Felstiner, reflecting on Paul Celan's poem *ES STAND*, commented that the most a poem can do is to bring four worlds together through its metaphors or images. "And when it does," he said, "the poem becomes explosive." These worlds are the *natural* (creation), the *spiritual*, the *political/geographical*, and the *personal*. When we apply the four worlds of the poet to David's psalms, we can begin to appreciate their enduring significance through their many layers of memory. First, there is the historical situation that places them in the context of David's story. Second, we find Israel using David's psalms in new situations with different liturgical settings. Third, these prayers take on greater significance as they give shape to Jesus' prayers. Finally, as we are "in Christ," David's psalms become our prayers.

I experienced the explosive power of the poem on my second visit to Romania in 1989. While we were studying the David/Jonathan story, several agents from Romania's secret police (the Securitate) were searching for us in the forest in order to arrest our hosts for housing us (it was illegal to have foreigners in their homes without reporting it to the police) and conducting a Bible conference. In the midst of their intrusions into our camp, four brothers (all were named Jonathan, as if by divine coincidence) put their lives on the line to protect us from the police. I had never experienced this kind of sacrificial love before. It was as if the ancient David/Jonathan story was being re-enacted right before our eyes. At one point I took my position on a secure height to watch for any agents who might be coming up the road, while the Romanians took cover inside a large tent to worship and study God's word. Sitting in silence I began meditating on Psalm 27. David's metaphors broke my soul wide open.

When evildoers assail me
 to eat up my flesh,
 my adversaries and foes,
 it is they who stumble and fall. (Ps 27:2)

On four different occasions, the Securitate came to devour our souls, but each time they stumbled and fell. And then I read further in the psalm:

For he will hide me in his shelter
 in the day of trouble;
 he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;

Climbing with the Psalms: Give Me an Authentic Voice

he will lift me high upon a rock.
And now my head shall be lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the LORD. (Ps 27:5-6)

As I was reading these verses, I could hear the voices of the Romanians singing their songs of praise concealed “under the cover of his tent.” The David story and song that had shaped Jesus’ story, was now shaping our lives in this new setting on a hillside in Costești, România. I was overcome with the joy of having a small part on the stage God’s wondrous drama of redemption.

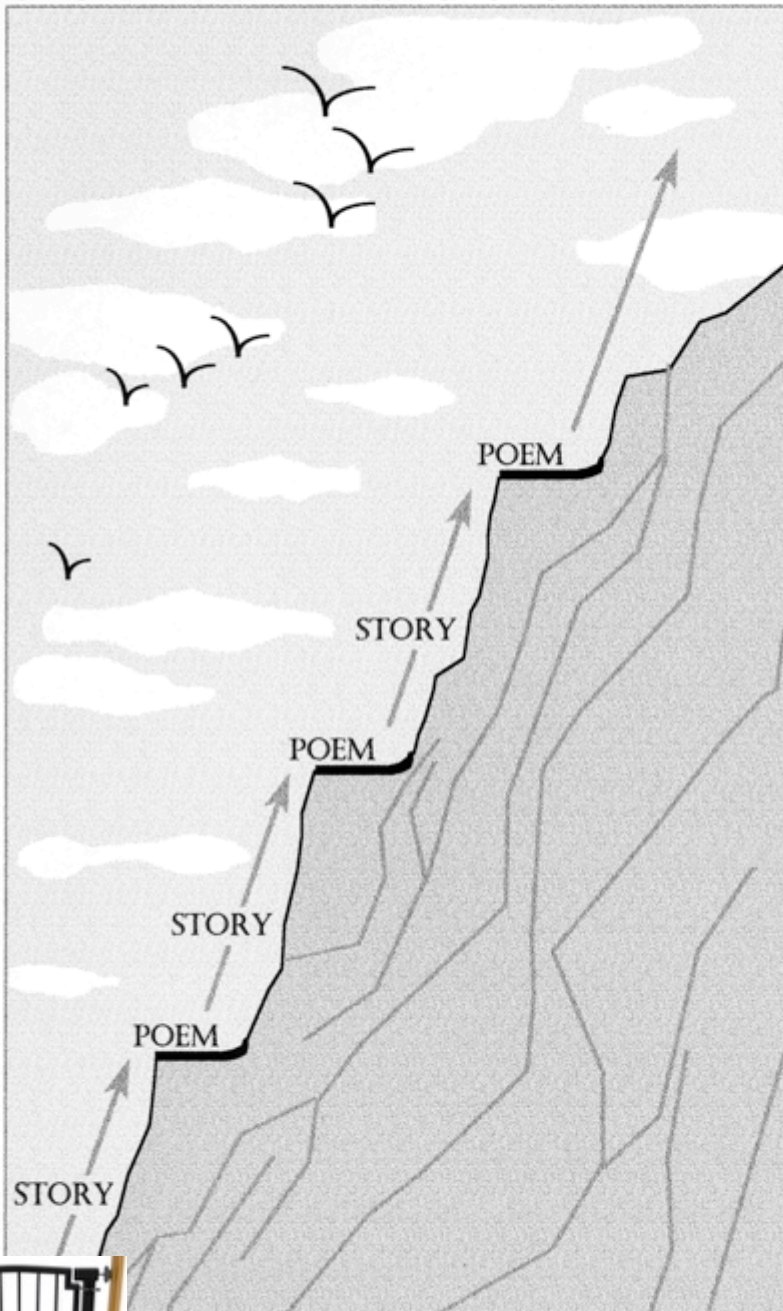


This explains why certain hymns or spiritual songs evoke strong emotions within us, while others may not. When specific lyrics give voice to significant experiences in our lives, or to emotions we haven’t yet been able to articulate, or evoke layers of memory and accumulated emotions, they can stir our hearts to the core. The hymn “It Is Well with My Soul” has always been a favorite of mine. I came to appreciate it first for its lyrics that give voice to trust and contentment at a time of loss. My appreciation was heightened when I learned the occasion for which it was originally written. But it wasn’t until I sang it with a couple grieving over their six-year-old son at Stanford Hospital, that its power became explosive. As Timothy had only hours left to live, we lifted our voices to sing the hymn. I didn’t remember the second verse, but the nurse taking care of Timothy did. And she did not hold back. With her full-throated voice she boomed out the second verse. When she did, it was as if angels came into the room and flooded us with a peace I can only describe as transcendent. Suddenly the hospital room was transformed into the gate of heaven. I watched in awe as a mother held and caressed her dead son. Then Timothy’s nurse washed his body with as much dignity as if he was Jesus. The sting of death had disappeared, totally.

That Sunday at church our worship leader had selected the hymn not knowing what we had experienced earlier in the week. As the words rang out, I looked behind me and saw Timothy’s mother singing, tears streaming down her face. We made eye contact in the secret acknowledgement of what God had done that week. Such is the power of the poem.

Spiritual Rhythms for our Journey

the STORY and the POEM



The power of the
STORY
pulls us into a drama that
is bigger than ourselves and
shows us that our life
is a journey .

The power of the
POEM
causes us to be still and allow
musings and stirrings that have
been brewing deep
within our soul, to surface,
and then they find
shape and form through
memory and metaphor .

In public recitation of the
POEM,
we can find
eternal significance
(spiritual integration with
ourselves, our God and our
community)
as we pause along the journey .

The **STORY**
moves us .

The **POEM**
stills us .

The **STORY**
draws us *up* the mountain .

The **POEM**
allows us to take in the vistas !



The **POEM** stills us, so that we may take in the vistas and extract the eternal from the **STORY**.

The **STORY** draws us into a world bigger than ourselves and we can ascend up the mountain.

bgm 2-02

“**HONESTY**” – The gateway up the mountain