



### Surprised by the Power of the Poem

Today is my final sermon as a paid employee of Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino. But, hopefully, it won't be my last. For all of you have managed for last 30 plus years to escape my classes on poetry and the psalms, this sermon is for you—It is my last ditch propaganda pitch for poetry.

### The Trouble with Poetry

To help us get started, we have an encouraging word from Charlie Brown. Sally is having trouble understanding poetry, so she poses her dilemma to Charlie Brown.



### Besieged by poetry

Like most of my discoveries in life, the gift of **poetry** in a word-soaked world landed upon me much later than I would have preferred. But as is often the case, the wait only served to increase my capacity for joy. Shortly after Emily and I were married in 1972, we lost our firstborn son, David Jonathan, nine days after birth due to a rare enzyme deficiency. The following year our daughter Jessica endured the same fate. Nothing prepared me for how to process my grief until 1988, when poetry found me.

Of the many paths of discovery, mine was not unlike that of Chilean poet Pablo Neruda:

And it was at that age... Poetry arrived  
in search of me. I don't know, I don't know 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.<sup>1</sup>

I was that age, thirty-seven, when poetry arrived. On the outskirts of hell a poet had shaped the soul of his nation to sing. The place was România and the year 1988, a little more than a year before the brutal, 20-year regime of Nicolae Ceausescu would come to an end with his execution on December 25, 1989. The poet was Traian Dorz, born exactly seventy years earlier on December 25, 1914, a man of profound and abiding faith who watched in horror as his beloved country was ravaged, raped and left to grope alone in the darkness, her dignity stolen, her faith mercilessly stomped out. Working in this wasteland, God gave Dorz a voice powerful enough to pierce the oppressive darkness of Communist Romania and energize his silent, suffering countrymen.

So powerful were his poems that 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. For it was Dorz's conviction that "man cannot live without poetry."

Over the next seventeen years of imprisonment, house arrest and brutal torture, 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 4500 poems.

Just as in King David's story, this poet "would have the last word, not to mention the silence after."<sup>2</sup> Ceausescu, the dictator, and Traian Dorz both died in 1989. Ceausescu has no lasting legacy from his fleeting, vulgar shadow, but today, thousands of Romanians sing Dorz's immortal songs as the sacred expression of their faith. 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. In every resonant syllable of a language I could not yet understand I “felt a grim energy verging on elation.”<sup>3</sup>

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

### **Embraced by the poet**

And then I met the man. It was a warm summer evening in Cluj. I just 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—Traian Dorz, seventy-three years of age. 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, drawn by a holy love. I showed him a photo I had taken of the Roman pavement stone in Israel where Pilate presented the scourged Jesus to the crowds, saying, “Behold the man” (in Latin *ecce homo*). He took it and held it with unspeakable tenderness and wept. Then he took me into his arms, looked deep into my eyes and said, “*You teach about the cross....we live under the cross.*”

Then in an act of extreme tenderness, he gently pressed his cheek to mine and prayed for me. I needed no translation. Like the apostle Paul, he was praying that I might “have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth of the love Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge” (Eph 3:17-19), a love that he had come to know in suffering living *under* the cross. The words rolled off his tongue in dream-like cadences. The soft timbre and pulsating rhythms of his voice 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. “Suddenly I saw the heavens unfastened and open...my heart broke loose with the wind.”<sup>4</sup> 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.

At the border the Securitate tore through all our belongings, but did not look inside my sleeping bag where the hymnal was hidden. A Jewish believer in our congregation was so moved by the sacrificial love he experienced among Dorz's spiritual children, that he took his father's inheritance and used it to publish 20,000 copies. I had no idea how to get them back into the country. But by faith, Jim Foster and another brother drove the books across Europe in a large semi-truck shortly after the revolution. There was so much chaos at the border, the hymnals made it through unmolested. When they handed them out, the believers wept with joy, as if my two friends were giving away gold. Later, we published 8,000 copies of the poet's authorized autobiography in his native tongue so that everyone in Romania could know the poet intimately. Eventually we had it translated into English.

### **Poetry etched on human hearts**

Traian Dorz's literary achievements are massive, and given the conditions in which he wrote, they stagger the imagination. But the ultimate testimony of the poet's greatness is found not in what is written with ink, "but [what is written] by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts" (2 Cor 3:3). This is what gave David's psalms their abiding power. The Holy Spirit not only inspired his psalms, but also continues to empower them to bring us into the presence of the divine voice and to make it our own, as David's final poem testifies.

**Now these are the last words of David:**

**The oracle of David, the son of Jesse,  
the oracle of the man who was raised on high,  
the anointed of the God of Jacob,  
the sweet psalmist of Israel:  
"The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me;  
his word is on my tongue." (2 Sam 23:1-2)**

David's inspired metaphors gave shape to the voice of Israel's future kings and ultimately taught Jesus how to pray and sing his praises. In many of the psalms, David's metaphors transcend his own experience and find their literal fulfillment in Jesus Christ (Pss 2, 22; Acts 2:24-32). Because we are in Christ, the Psalter becomes our prayer book giving voice to our laments and praises as we labor to bring God's heavenly reign to

earth. But it doesn't end there. Paul exhorts the believers in Ephesus to "fill out" (*plēroō*) the life of the Spirit by singing *new* songs, glorifying God for his continual acts of salvation because of his never failing love.

**"...be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Eph 5:19-20)**

### **Ravished by love**

Dorz's *Immortal Songs* coupled with the fragrance of his holy life unleashed a spiritual force that baptized his disciples with unconquerable love. In this raging sea of suspicion and fierce hate, they created islands of refuge, embracing others with outrageous generosity that knew no limits. Nothing prepared me for their welcoming embrace. Their love was almost too difficult to receive. In those days families were rationed five eggs a month and a few meager ounces of meat. But as guests in their homes, we found that there were two eggs on our plate when we arrived at breakfast.

Prior to my first visit to Cluj, the Securitate had discovered the whereabouts of Lord's Army's sacred meetings and promptly bulldozed their church. Not to be deterred, they continued to meet secretly in homes. Though it was illegal to take foreigners into their homes, it was unthinkable to our hosts to have it any other way. The second year a neighbor discovered that my friends were hosting me and promptly informed the Securitate.

When the police came to arrest me, no one was home, and I was forced to quickly flee the city with no passport or belongings. It's a terrible feeling to think that your presence has put someone's life in jeopardy. But my host was fearless, and sought me out. When he discovered me in the middle of a busy intersection, he unabashedly embraced me and shouted, "*Te iubesc!*" ("I love you") Taking no thought for his own safety, his sole concern was to return my belongings and give me a beautiful bedspread his wife made for us. As I left Cluj in tears I could still hear Big John's thundering voice –

O, noi ne-am bizuit pe Domnul  
De aceea, când zdrobiți păream,  
Spre fericita izbăvire  
Deplin încrezători priveam.

Oh we trusted in the Lord  
that's why, when it looked like we were struck down  
we were looking confidently  
to our bright salvation

As the Apostle James writes, “the prayer of a righteous person has great power in its working” (Jas 5:16). Traian Dorz’s prayer for me was beginning to transform my life and would continue to do so for years to come. After escaping the clutches of the Securitate in Cluj, Ceausescu’s cronies followed us into the forest where we conducted a second camp in Costești. It was here that I experienced the “explosive” power of the poem.

Reflecting on Paul Celan’s poem *ES STAND*, John Felstiner, Stanford University professor of English and poetry, 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* world of creation, the *spiritual*, the *political/geographical*, and the *personal*.

While we were studying the David/Jonathan story, several Securitate agents were searching for us in the forest. In the midst of their intrusions into our camp, three brothers (all were named Jonathan, as if by divine coincidence) put their lives on the line to protect us from being arrested. 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 (1 Sam 18:1-5). 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;  
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.” Suddenly I realized that all four worlds were converging before my eyes. The David story and song that had shaped Jesus’ story and Dorz’s poetry, was now shaping our lives in this new setting on a hillside in Costești, România.

At the height of danger, Nelu Beg (Big John) arrived to tell us the Securitate was setting up a roadblock to arrest us after the conference was over. Despite the threat of arrest, he wanted to take me to his village to give me a gift. At midnight under the cover of darkness he drove me out of the camp past the roadblock to his apartment. After we ascended several flights of stairs we entered his small apartment. It was here that my friend nursed Traian Dorz during his last days of sickness until his death.

Against the wall there was a bookcase filled with treasured items – the poet’s watch set to the time of his death, several books of poetry, personal photographs, his glasses, pens, etc. We were like two pilgrims who traversed the enemy’s camp undetected and now crossed the threshold into all that was safe and sacred. We sat silent in the shadow of the poet, incapable of speech. Nelu Beg would later write, “I feel small and unworthy to thank the Lord that in his secret plan of saving the world, He found it in his heart that we would support each other on our going to salvation, and maybe pass together, embraced, at the gate of eternity.”

### **The Romanian poet in California**

Coming home, I came to treasure the poem and to recognize its unique power to unlock grief in the soul in a way that doesn’t deny or obliterate it, but rather transcends it by naming and embracing our grief in the presence of God and his people. Besides the Psalms, David’s lament over Jonathan (2 Sam 1:17-27) became a signature text that revealed some of the mystery as to why the poem was such an effective tool to process and transcend grief for the ancients.

The story of David and Jonathan is the most wonderful tale of friendship in the Bible. Their relationship began from a distance. Jonathan was a keen spectator during David’s confrontation with Goliath. Something indescribable happened to Jonathan that day. Instead of feeling jealous and displaced, Jonathan loved this kindred spirit. In a demonstration of that spirit he stripped himself of his weapons and gave them to David, publicly acknowledging that his friend was the rightful heir to Saul’s crown and pledged

his life in service him, regardless of the cost. Jonathan kept his vow and it cost him his life. (every time put on the crown...David remembers the cost)

In the final strophe, after giving voice to unspeakable loss and grief in a national lament, the poem takes a very personal turn. David speaks a final word to his friend. It is always a moving moment at a memorial service when the living speak directly to the dead. Years of buried feelings surface and saturate a few well-chosen words with a lifetime of emotion.

**I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;  
very pleasant have you been to me;  
your love to me was extraordinary,  
surpassing the love of women. (2 Sam 1:26)**

The most amazing thing about the power of the poem is David's ability to go back to a past time and place where he was once painfully absent and now relive the event as if he had been present. Before the poem, Jonathan was dead, David was absent, God was ? and Gilboa was desecrated. The poem's power transforms a once tragic moment into a holy moment, for now not only is Jonathan present (as if raised from the dead), but David is present as well – and so is God. In the recitation there is holy love flowing between them all on Gilboa, which is now sanctified.

### **A Window That Transcends Time**

Once the poem is constructed it creates a window into heaven that transcends time. And this holy window remains open forever inviting all to freely relive the event in all the holiness of sacred memory. Every time the poem is read the transcendence of heaven uniting with earth, of friends embracing, of love bursting the breast, breaks in upon us again and again.

Through those intensifying cadences of the poet we were mysteriously drawn to a place and time where we did not want to go, to a forbidden place and foreboding time when memories were marred by the tragic and lacerated by loss. But now the tragic has been transformed into the sacred. And those poetic cadences and rhymes we once dreaded, now fill us with hope and anticipation of life, beautiful life, holy life that we can relive again and again. The poem creates a window into the sacred that transcends time, a widow that remains open...forever.

One of the most painful moments of my life came on Friday, December 2nd, 1976. I had just gotten a call from the hospital to say that Jessica, my newborn daughter, was



very sick. One medical test told the whole story. She had the same enzyme deficiency my son had died from a year earlier. I knew Jessica was destined to die. Accompanied by one of our elders, I made my way to the hospital to see her for the last time. I could only look at her for a short time before I turned away. I could not bear the pain. As I left the hospital waves of grief came crashing over me. I wanted to weep, but was too embarrassed in front of my friend. I was not there when Jessica died. She died alone, abandoned by her father. When the hospital graciously offered to take care of her body, I welcomed that. I could not bear the thought of laying her little body in the ground. How could we endure another memorial service? The thought was morbid to me.

### **It is Well with My Soul**

Sixteen years later, God called me back to the same hospital. Again, it was in December and, just as when both my children died, it was raining. There a precious boy of one of our church families was fighting for his life. I did not want to go, but I was mysteriously yet powerfully drawn to watch as a dear couple loved their son and refused to turn away from the face of death. As he lay dying, we began singing hymns and psalms. When we sang the words of the second verse of the hymn, "It Is Well With My Soul," heaven united with earth and love burst forth from our breasts. There came a transcendent sense of peace, of power and victory over death that I will never forget.

God was gracious to call me back to my Gilboa to see what I did not want to see. I discovered that even when I left my daughter, he was there all along, caring and loving. Following David's example, I wrote a poem for Jessica. Through the power of its images I was able to reconnect with her: to tell her I loved her, to experience holy love and the power of God that transcends death. I have gone back to that time and place many times. It has become a sacred memory.

(memories of Jessica Lynne, gravestone, Western Sem, Tahoe yellow rose)

Having experienced the healing poem of my own laments, I encouraged (or coerced) others in the congregation to write their own poems/psalms of lament and praise and offer them publicly as acts of worship. Our experiences, rather than being a litany of morbid dirges, became unforgettable moments uniting us in sacred love. Fragmented people who had been living broken lives, disassociated from their pain and trying desperately to live victorious Christian lives began instead to deal with grief head on, to heal, to participate honestly in the larger community of faith, and walk with God in deeper intimacy.

For the decades that followed, I traveled with teams on the wings of the poem and have never been disappointed as the poem led us to the deepest wells, where “love gushed forth filling every crack” (T. S. Eliot). Over the next thirty years we made over a dozen trips into Romania, walking alongside our Romanian friends as they also used David’s psalms and Dorz’ poems to recover their own voices from the ashes of lives that had been horribly crushed and disfigured beneath Ceausescu’s vicious lash.

Experiencing the power of the poem changed my orientation as a pastor. I have always been passionate about teaching the Hebrew Scriptures in all their beauty. But it never occurred to me that teaching was only first step in making disciples. If God’s chosen *way* of communicating to humankind was “story” and “poem,” then my job is to equip people to become storytellers and poets. Now my greatest delight is to give God’s people the tools in the art of Biblical narrative and poetry to acquire their own voice. The crowning moment comes when I step off the stage and listen to a symphony of voices, set free to be honest and true, engaging the living God. It is a gift that, as the poet prayed, has enlarged my heart to begin to comprehend the length, breadth, and height of the love of Christ.

Like the Canaanite woman in Mark’s gospel (7:26-30), I came to Romania as a foreigner distraught over the death of my son and my daughter. Not knowing Romanian, I had no capacity to feed my thirsty soul on the poet’s feast. But by God’s grace I was given a crumb. With just one touch of the poet I was able to name my grief, transcend my sorrow, and just as the poet prayed, I was swallowed by the love of Christ. And in the process of losing two children, I gained a nation of children, whom I love as my own.

What the ancient poet wrote came true:

**“Weeping may come to lodge for the night,  
but a shout of JOY comes in the morning!”** (Ps 30:5)

On the ten year anniversary of meeting the poet, I wrote a poem entitled “*Time Beneath His Shadow,*” to express my appreciation for that one touch of the poet and our Romanian friends who adopted us as their own. James Garcia has put it to music.

### 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.

### Timpul în Umbra Lui

Zece ani,  
par'c-a fost ieri,  
în noaptea când fusei îmbrățișat  
obraz lângă obraz,  
și-am auzit dulcele său glas,  
ș-acele pulsânde ritmuri,  
ce m-au cuprins și mi-au pătruns în inimă.

Zece ani, abia sunt ca o zi  
sub umbra poetului  
ca să privești în ochii cei mai puri  
ai umiliților, pulbere fină  
fiii sfinți  
ce n-au cuvânt de dat sau de cerut,  
dar prin tăcerea lor  
eu știu acum că sufletul meu  
ciudat este-mpletit, unit într-unul cu al lor.

Zece ani, o repede adiere,  
într-o clipire-a unui ochi  
ce încadrează-ntr-o fereastră  
în juru-acele patru voci de îngeri  
atrăgătorul cântec de Vecernie,  
și-mi amintesc mereu vibrantele lui note,  
dornic s-ating mai mult timp fața lor.

Zece ani, dar nici-o zi  
nu m-am grăbit să stau, ci am zburat departe  
ca o pasăre, în fiecare noapte  
spre-acele secrete Carpatice înălțimi,  
cu lanțul culmilor ce ma înalța  
și văile ce mă înghit  
în iarba verde jilavă de rouă,  
ce-o simt și-acum în răsuflarea mea,  
le vad și-acum în strălucirea lunii,  
și-n umbra nopții și-n liniștea aerului  
ce-mi dau în suflet o nespusă liniște.

Zece ani, eu singuratic te caut  
ca-n fiecare zi și noapte sufăr,  
zece ani căutând iar fântâna lui tata  
așa cum un pierdut și-uitat iubit  
își caută pe sfânta lui mireasă.

Ten years, one touch,      Zece ani, o-mbrăţisare  
cheek to cheek,      obraz lângă obraz  
and now I live forever      încă şi-acum eu trăiesc veşnic  
in that timeless space      în acel spaţiu fără timp  
beneath the shadow of the poet.      sub umbra poetului.

Brian Morgan      poet român, pierdut undeva în america

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<sup>1</sup> Ilan Staven ed., *The Poetry of Pablo Neruda* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 659.

<sup>2</sup> John Felstiner's description of the figure Shulammitte in Paul Celan's poem "Deathfugue" in *Paul Celan, Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 41.

<sup>3</sup> Felstiner's description of "becoming conversant" with the poetry of Paul Celan. *Paul Celan, Poet, Survivor, Jew*, xix.

<sup>4</sup> Ilan Staven ed., *The Poetry of Pablo Neruda*, 660.