

The Joys (and Curious Political Implications) of Reciting Poetry

Do you remember the film, “Il Postino?” A barely literate postman steals one of Pablo Neruda’s poems to impress his lover. When Neruda catches him at this plagiarism, the postman blurts out, *“Poetry does not belong to those who made it. It belongs to those who need it!”* How about William Carlos Williams: *“It’s difficult to get the news from poetry. Yet men die every day – miserably – for the lack of what’s in there.”* Or Hafiz: *“The great religions are ships; the poets are lifeboats. Every sane person I know has jumped overboard: this is good for business, Hafiz!”*

Here in the San Francisco Bay Area there has been a marvelous resurgence of what we call the “Oral Tradition” in the past twenty years. It’s expressed in many forms. Storytelling festivals attract hundreds of listeners, as do visits by poets such as Robert Bly, Coleman Barks, Mary Oliver and David Whyte. Three thousand people attend the Northern California finals of the Youth Speaks Teen Poetry Slam competition (www.youthspeaks.org). There are poetry readings, slams, spoken word events and “story swaps” every night of the week.

And something else has been going on. Around 1990 some of us, initially at Doug Von Koss’s prompting, began to meet for informal Oral Traditions Salons. We quickly installed only one rule: no reading! We encouraged each other to feel the difference between hearing poems read and poems told “by heart.” Very few of the poems were original. We had Yeats, Rumi, Dickinson, Rilke, Oliver, Hafiz, Neruda, Machado and many others to pick from. It was a stretch: actually working with a poem until one knew it so well that it came out of one’s own experience, out of one’s own bones and heart.

People, of course, chose to memorize only those poems that were deeply meaningful to them. So recitation of those poems within a circle of people with deep intention and attention – in ritual space – became an act of self-revelation. We encouraged *real listening*, rather than shuffling papers and preparing for one's next poem, as people do at many poetry readings, which I, frankly, do not enjoy.

When someone finished a poem, someone else who was deeply moved might ask him or her to repeat it. Sometimes we'd sit in silence until someone was truly inspired by that poem to contribute another one by the same poet, or perhaps a poem on a similar subject. The mood would shift from poems of love, praise and spiritual ecstasy or longing to humor to anti-war laments, loss and deep grief, and back. This was real communication, but in beautiful images. "Words I have," says Yeats, "...that can pierce the heart." We gradually realized that we were independently re-imagining the old Sufi tradition of the *sohbet*, a poetic conversation between friends of spirit and heart.

People gradually grew confident in holding the energy, to make the experience as meaningful as possible. Some attend many of these events and never share anything. That's fine: they're happy just listening. And they listen with deep intention. But one of the most satisfying moments for me is when someone who hasn't previously recited musters the courage (curiously, such people often have no problem whatsoever speaking to business groups!) to recite a poem for the first time. Christine Walker, after attending silently for several sessions, suddenly burst out with this beauty:

On Hearing a Poem Recited, Not Read

The poem flew at me

Little darts, pricking my skin

piercing my belly, my arms, my eyes

*Flew at me on swift, black wings
trailing a smoky blur past my ears
Flew all around me
furious, then curiously quiet
No words sounded like words
read from a page
They had been lifted
the night before, years before
Flipped up, one by one
letter by letter let fall
on the tongue and dissolved
like melting snowflakes trickling down
through the heart, into the belly
to the toes, the fingertips
Pulled back through the blood
through the brain
down into the back of the throat
into the cheeks and spit out
Little darts of words
big wings of words
charging the air all around me
There were no words, only language
Tongue moved by muscle and blood
The poem entered me and exited
leaving little points of pain and light
soft feathery strokes on my skin and hair
Leaving me empty of words*

Eventually, some of us went public. Around the year 2000 in Berkeley, Dan and Dale Zola began to organize annual “Great Night Of Rumi” and “Great Night of Soul Poetry” events, in which some of us recited poetry along with musical improvisation to crowds of up to three hundred people (www.dzola.com/berkeley_poetry_performers.asp). Meanwhile, Larry Robinson presented the first “Rumi’s Caravan” in Sonoma

County (www.rumiscaravan.com), a poetic conversation that has since appeared in a half-dozen locations from Oakland to Mount Shasta. The surprisingly large crowds we attract indicate that there is a great hunger for this kind of “from the heart” sharing.



Beyond that universal hunger, we sensed the necessity of making beauty for its own sake. Again, with prompting from Doug (recently retired as prop master at the San Francisco Opera House), we have attempted to make the stage backgrounds stunningly gorgeous and to invite the most soulful music

accompaniment. We have found musicians who are capable of intuiting the emotions and tone of a poem as we recite it. We sometimes offer an additional treat, an actual Sufi dancer doing the Dervish “turn” as Rumi is said to have originally done it. We offer Middle Eastern food and encourage audience member to dress lavishly, to join in with our attempt to bring soul back into the world. Am I getting a bit inflated here? Great!

And there’s more: I’m willing to entertain the possibility that these events have long-term political implications. Interest in the Oral Tradition has grown so quickly because we need it, as the postman said. Modern people and Americans in particular suffer from an unprecedented impoverishment of the imagination. Our popular and political cultures have become so diminished because to a great extent we’ve lost the ability to think in mythic or metaphorical terms.

The loss of imagination gave us our current political and environmental crises. And don’t think that elites aren’t aware of this. Two days after 9-11, Clear Channel Communications barred its 1,200 radio stations from playing John Lennon’s “Imagine.” But the revival of the Oral Tradition counters this slide into literal thinking with an invitation to speak from the heart, with images that go past the head and convey the richness, ambiguity, tragedy and mystery of the soul.

To Frederico Garcia Lorca, imagination was “synonymous with discovery...(it) fixes and gives clear life to fragments of the invisible reality where man is stirring.” We can replicate the original process of myth making – by telling as many alternative stories, as often as possible, for as long as necessary, until they coalesce into the world’s new story.

Imagination is the fundamentally human gesture, “the capacity to see things that are not there,” says Michael Meade. Imagination

builds a bridge between fate (what is given to us) and destiny (what we do with it). Then, says Lorca, the artist stops dreaming and begins to desire. Love moves from imagination, which “creates a poetic atmosphere,” to *inspiration*, which invents the “poetic fact.” Thus the imagination, engaged by the restoration of memory, moves us from invocation to inspiration, where new life comes not from us but *through* us.

Now, all creative acts have political implications. Dianne Di Prima writes, “*The only war that matters is the war against the imagination.*” Another poet, Frances Ponge, says that genuine hope lies in “...a poetry through which the world so invades the spirit of man that he becomes almost speechless and later reinvents a language.” Perhaps we are required to collapse so deeply into the mournful realization of how much we have lost that we become speechless. Perhaps only from that position can new forms of art and language arise that might break the spell of our amnesia.

So I encourage you to start to work with some of your favorite shorter poems. Recite them over and over in the car or the shower. Take the time to feel where a poem lands in your body, what memories it evokes – and what hidden strengths you discover. Then start a group, tell them to some friends, and see if you inspire them to go someplace in the soul they haven’t been in awhile. Then imagine telling them at some city council meeting. Why not? Rational, polite, considered discourse hasn’t got us very far. Perhaps a poem from your heart will move someone’s soul in a way that invites the world itself to change. “*You have tried prudent planning for long enough,*” says Rumi. “*This is not the age of information,*” writes David Whyte:

*This is the age of loaves and fishes,
People are hungry,
And one good word is bread*

For a thousand.

**Come join Rumi's Caravan in Sebastopol on February
10th: <http://www.rumiscaravan.com/events/>**