

Connecting with God and ourselves through poetry

“Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to the heavens, you are there;
If I make my bed in hell, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning,
And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
Even there your hand will guide me,
Your right hand will hold me fast.” – PS 139:7-10 NIV

Context: Moving Into a Regular Practice of Poetry

The Bible can be poetry.

When I was struggling with faith in college, I walked alongside my English professor from the classroom back to my dormitory. She was Jewish, and I asked her, *what is even the point?* Why read the Bible, if you can’t believe it?

And she reminded me that in times of stress, I could read the Bible not just as history—as anthropology—as ethical guide from God—but also as poetry. Especially in psalms, like Psalm 139, which I just read, there’s a lyrical reflection on our life which brings perspective to our highs and lows.

I needed this perspective, because in my second year of college, I started experiencing more and more highs and lows. Everything in my life was going well—but I had mood swings. I had anxiety. I was feeling aggressive, and confused. I got depressed, and overwhelmed. I started to withdraw, and then felt isolated. And although I sensed God in study and research, thinking so intensely brought its own kind of disconnection.

But when I went to the library and read poetry, I could connect with my own experiences. I saw that other people *felt* the world—in ways similar to me. They wrote echoes of my own joy and grief. And through them, I could find my way back to connection.

In particular, I read Gerard Manley Hopkins, a Jesuit priest living in England in the 19th century, whose poetry connected in my own dark times, as when he wrote:

“I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.
What hours, O what black hours we have spent
This night! what sights you, heart, saw; ways you went!
And more must, in yet longer light's delay.
... And my lament
Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent
To dearest Him that lives alas! away.”

So I didn't have to force a connection to something spiritual when I wasn't feeling it. It was okay to be worried about myself—about my family—about my world in the middle of a war. I didn't have to pretend to be happy all the time.

Instead, by connecting in to sadness and grief through poetry, I could come to a peace that brings life.

Practice: Ways to Practice Poetry

So how do you do this?

Well, I'm a very visual person, so I tend to sit down with coffee in a quiet space, and read poems.

But you can also listen on podcasts or audio CDs.

Either way, I start by browsing or listening until I find something that catches my heart.

I pause, and then I listen again. I read it again.

And if I especially like it, I might even write it down and carry it with me.

At times, I memorize especially good poems that for me have lasting value, so that the words come more easily to me in times of stress.

Abraham Lincoln, for instance, started reading and memorizing poetry from a young age. He read books in his stepfather's library, selected out the poems that spoke most to him, and committed them to heart. And he tried writing poems of his own.

The result? Well, he recited lots of dour poetry at parties—obviously he was a fun person! :-) Yet his practice of poetry [influenced](#) his courage and leadership in a time of war.

Poetry inspire his faith in God and a larger purpose for the nation.

And reading and writing poetry led to his lyrical speechwriting, which caught the attention of the nation at a time where our country was torn apart.

Results: In stressful seasons of life

But what's the benefit on a smaller scale?

During stressful times in my own life, I have found that immersing myself in vivid words and images gives comfort when trusting God and the world around me seems difficult and illogical. It gave me a broader vision when working abroad during the long dark winters in Siberia. And it helps me to relax even when I don't know where I'm going next.

So especially now, as many of us face major life changes—even good ones!—ongoing personal challenges, and stress on the national level, cultivating, exploring, and absorbing these words can help us to pause and take a Sabbath.

It can help us step back from *doing* all the time.

It can help us to care for ourselves, to build empathy with others, and cultivate a sense of connection to wider things.

In this, I think of a poem by writer Wendell Berry, *The Peace of Wild Things*:

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound

in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Tips: Ways to get Started

If you'd like to get started in a practice of poetry, I suggest browsing books at your library or bookstore.

You can listen on websites like [Poetry Out Loud](#) and Garrison Keillor's [Writer's Almanac](#). You can listen to the [Poetry Foundation](#) podcast.

And you can also absorb what you listen to through doodling, or praying afterwards.

You can even go deeper with artwork, as I did by creating an altered book of Hopkins' poem, *God's Grandeur*:

And though the last lights off the black west went,
Ah morning! At the brown brink eastward springs... [image on slides]

And you can read poetry aloud at church, or in times of retreat with others, letting this emotional language connect directly to your heart.

With all of this in mind, I'll close with a poem by Anne Sexton, called *Snow*. You're welcome to close your eyes and listen, or open them and follow the words on the screen:

Snow,
blessed snow,
comes out of the sky
like bleached flies.
The ground is no longer naked.
The ground has on its clothes.
The trees poke out of sheets
and each branch wears the sock of God.

There is hope.
There is hope everywhere.
I bite it.
Someone once said:

*Don't bite till you know
if it's bread or stone.*

What I bite is all bread,
rising, yeasty as a cloud.

There is hope.
There is hope everywhere.
Today God gives milk
and I have the pail.