



## **Ode to Poetry**

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If you read this week's minister column you will notice that I wrote about sleep apnea. I was recently diagnosed with sleep apnea, a medical condition that causes a person to either breathe shallowly or stop breathing during sleep. Like most people with sleep apnea, I do both. The major problem with sleep apnea is that it prevents deep sleep, and this condition goes on for months and years until a diagnosis is made and treatment begun. Deep sleep is regenerative. It leads to higher concentration, energy, and excellent memory, all things I have been having problems with in the last year.

I tell you this because I realized that I will only preach one time in May. There is choral worship, youth Sunday, and next week, an exceptional guest speaker from the UUA, the Reverend Terry Sweetser. I hope you will come to hear him. I often preach less in May because of choral worship and youth Sunday, but this year I noticed that, though I will be present, I will be out of the pulpit four weeks in a row. There is a reason for this.

Friends, the hardest thing for me to do now is write a sermon, which takes energy, concentration, and a good memory, all things I lack at the moment. I started treatment two months ago, and it helps, but what I really need to do is sleep, a lot, so I can enjoy the benefits of deep sleep. I hope you will be patient in this next month, and appreciate others in the pulpit, so that I can start recovering. Your support will be greatly appreciated.

I suspect some of you enjoy me in the pulpit because it is familiar. There has been a lot of change going on at First Church in the last four years – renovation, additional worship services, new staff. Sometimes it seems like the only things to remain the same are our custodian, Leroy, and me, your minister (though of course, even we change – note the sleep apnea which I did not have four years ago). Everything

changes. That is the world we live in, and it is hard. Change reminds us of impermanence, and death, our secret lack of control.

I find all the change hard too. Sometimes I just miss Jim Percival in the front row here wearing a yellow turtleneck. Jim has been dead eleven years and I still miss him. Or Ed and Evelyn Christenson right over here, or Frank Homan, or Don Heisel, or Esther Muhlberger who made this pillow for me. I just loved Esther, always a smile, bright colors, walking quickly. Sometimes I miss the sleepy Sunday mornings we used to have, one service at 10:30, just a few kids, in our shabby chic building, quiet.

Do you know that every minute we are living we are dying? We change because change is living. Death is the one thing that stands still. I know change is hard, but we have to change to live, and we are changing in positive ways to enable more growth.

But loss is hard. According to former Poet Laureate Billy Collins “We only have a few themes in poetry; love, grief, separation, joy. Death is the main one.” He went on to explain

If you major in English, you major in death. Every poem is written in the shadow of death. Television tells us everything is going to be OK. Modern fiction tells us that everything is not going to be OK at all. Poetry tells us that everything is beautiful but you are going to die. As Wallace Stevens said “Death is the mother of beauty.”

Think about that “death is the mother of beauty.” Collins explained his point by noting that fake flowers are not nearly as beautiful as real flowers. Because fake flowers will still be around six months later, but real flowers will not, and this quality of life and death gives them beauty. It’s not that poets and poetry lovers are depressed, it is that they know the beauty, the wonder of life, is in the transience, and enjoying the moment, because everything passes.

Collins said these words in an interview with Diane Rehm last fall. He was being interviewed with another former Poet Laureate, Donald Hall who said that “Poems tend to take me to death and an appreciation of life.” He also noted that the first poem he wrote, when he was twelve years old, was about death. I spoke with one of our members, Sid Weil, this week and he confessed to me that the first poem he wrote, when he was 14, entitled “Finale,” was about, you guessed it, death. Perhaps this is true for you as well.

Dottie told me that Sid's favorite poem today is "Dover Beach" by Matthew Arnold. Here is the final stanza

Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! For the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are hear as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night

Poetry's power is that it deals with several things at once, life and death, grief and joy, love and despair, all contained in this poem, "Dover Beach." Hall noted that he "admires poems that say two things at once in opposition – that embody human ambivalence." His words reminded me of what it is like to be human, and to be at First Church now – the wonder of growth and the sadness of change. This is life embodying human ambivalence. This is satisfying poetry. There is something in the human spirit that cries out for the articulation of two things in opposition, the story of our lives, which we live every day.

Char Jackson sent me "Starlings in Winter" by Mary Oliver. *(Read)*

Dottie Weil sent me a poem that she wrote entitled "To a Spider"

You built across my door:  
Your shimmering web was round,  
A compact disk.  
I opened,  
And your masterpiece was spoiled.  
Apologies, dear master.  
If I could spin for you I would.

Micro-chip smart,  
When your work is wrecked,  
You slide down the silken skein  
And start again.

You make me wonder

What our clumsy two-footed selves  
Are for  
That we should ever hold ourselves above you.

My world is fragile:  
Stone, and wood, words and paint,  
And a thousand daily rituals,  
My circle hangs  
In parlous place,  
Like yours,

I wish I had your courage, your faith,  
To spin and weave, so light, so beautiful,  
A world above the dark below,  
The chancey door.

I am going to honor Dottie's poem by not commenting on it. Collins noted that for many people their first encounter with poetry involves the "intervention of teachers," asking what the poem "means" and in so doing, stripping the magic. As much as there is an art to creating poetry, and forms to follow such as iambic pentameter, both Hall and Collins described poetry as so much more than form. Hall described a "poem as a body delivered by the voice." He noted that he cares about the poem's authenticity and beauty, not what it means. I found this fascinating, and it certainly tempered my interest in "explaining" any poem to you.

Karen Rohrer sent me her favorite poem, "Know Thyself," by Alexander Pope. When I asked her why it was her favorite she wrote back "Honestly Sharon, why are you making me think?" She then went on to offer an explanation and concluded with "I don't know if my English professors would agree with my interpretation of this poem, but it doesn't matter. This is how I feel. And that's what poetry is about." Hall and Collins would agree entirely. Here is "Know Thyself" without the intervention of a minister

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;  
The proper study of mankind is Man.  
Placed on this isthmus of a middle state, A being darkly wise and rudely great:  
With too much knowledge for the Sceptic side,  
With too much weakness for the Stoic's pride  
He hangs between; in doubt to act or rest,  
In doubt to deem himself a God or Beast,  
In doubt his mind or body to prefer; Born but to die,

And reasoning but to err; Alike in ignorance,  
His reason such Whether he thinks too little or too much:  
Chaos of thought and passion, all confused;  
Still by himself abused, Or disabused;  
Created half to rise and half to fall;  
Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;  
Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurled:  
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!

Jo Ellen wrote me that her favorite poem is “Jabberwocky” by Lewis Carroll. She explained “It reminds me that language is not only about word meaning but about the sounds of the words and the emotions behind what we say. Using nonsense words he shared a feeling and story.” “Jabberwocky,” for all its nonsense words (“His vorpal blade went snicker snack”), is actually the only poem I can recite by heart, so Jo is completely correct that sound and emotion resonate in poetry.

Hall and Collins both agreed that poems are limited by the intervention of teachers, but that memorizing poetry, reading poetry out loud, and writing poetry are exceptional uses of poetry. Through memorization, poetry becomes part of a person (and helps us to live with the ambiguity and transience all around us – and those phrases of poetry return to us years later when circumstances require). Through reading poetry aloud, the words come alive in an oral tradition. I love to have Earl read poetry to me because he reads slowly so I can take it all in; there is time for the words and images to resonate with me in multiple ways.

Through writing poetry, we learn to appreciate well-written poetry. Donna Hoffman sent me this poem that her best friend, Ellen, wrote in third grade.

Little tube of toothpaste  
To me you're such a riddle.  
Instead of squeezing you from the top  
They squeeze you from the middle

You might be surprised to hear that both Collins and Hall believe that poetry is much more popular now than it used to be. There is classic poetry, slam poetry, underground poetry, all poetry. Both of them discussed the “divide” between “academic” and “popular” poetry, and the falseness of this divide. To Collins it is all poetry, and he likes the variety. Collins explained in his remarkably blunt, precise, and insightful way “Lack of a broad audience is a cause for constant lamentation. Yet it is the same world where success is deplored . . . if it's popular it can't be good. Because the ties between poetry and its own neglect are so firmly established.” I wonder if

those trained on classical poetry are shocked at the popularity of slam poets who attract crowds and fans. If it's popular, it can't be good, you know.

Tim Kraus introduced me to this wonderful Affrilachian (black, Appalachian) poet, Frank X. Walker. Here are three of his poems for you to enjoy, "Matriarch," "Amazing Grace," and "Wake." I could have read you ten poems out of this book; they are so meaty, so satisfying and real.

I want to close with an excerpt from a poem by Anne Porter. Proving that poetry is timeless, and gains meaning with the richness of time spent on earth, Porter published her first collection of poems when she was 83 years old. Susan Howard sent this poem, "Living Things" to me with the note "best description of what poetry really is." Here is an excerpt.

### **"Living Things"**

Our poems  
Are like the warthogs  
In the zoo  
It's hard to say  
Why there should be such creatures

But once our life gets into them  
As sometimes happens  
Our poems  
Turn into living things  
And there's no arguing  
With living things  
They are  
The way they are

I hope you enjoy living things, even amidst the challenge of change. As we enter a new season, and our congregation and the people in it continue to evolve, may I suggest poetry, an ode to ambiguity and celebration of all living things. Hallelujah.