

WHAT TO REMEMBER WHEN WAKING by David Whyte

(from "The House of Belonging" Many Rivers Press, 1997)

*In that first
hardly noticed
moment
to which you wake,
coming back
to this life
from the other
more secret,
moveable
and frighteningly
honest
world
where everything
began,
there is a small
opening
into the new day
which closes
the moment
you begin
your plans.*

What you can plan
is too small
for you to live.

What you can live
wholeheartedly
will make plans
enough
for the vitality
hidden in your sleep.

To be human
is to become visible
while carrying
what is hidden
as a gift to others.

*To remember
the other world
in this world
is to live in your
true inheritance.*

*You are not
a troubled guest
on this earth,
you are not
an accident
amidst other accidents
you were invited
from another and greater
night
than the one
from which
you have just emerged.*

Now, looking through
the slanting light
of the morning
window toward
the mountain
presence
of everything
that can be,
what urgency
calls you to your
one love? What shape
waits in the seed
of you to grow
and spread
its branches
against a future sky?

*Is it waiting
in the fertile sea?
In the trees
beyond the house?
In the life
you can imagine
for yourself?
In the open
and lovely
white page
on the waiting desk?*

Some poets on writing

“The poet’s job is to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, in such a beautiful way that people cannot live without it; to put into words those feelings we all have that are so deep, so important, and yet so difficult to name. The poet’s job is to find a name for everything; to be a fearless finder of the names of things; to be an advocate for the beauty of language, the subtleties of language. I think it’s very serious stuff, art; it’s not just decoration. The other job the poet has is to console in the face of inevitable disintegration, of loss and death, all of the tough things we have to face as humans. We have the consolation of beauty, of one soul, extending to another soul and saying, ‘I’ve been there too.’”

- Jane Kenyon

“If poetry and the arts do anything...they can fortify your inner life, your inwardness.” - Seamus Heaney

“If it turns out I haven’t written a great poem, fine. I really hope that I’ve written something a few people will want to keep in their heads, but to obsess about more than that is just a fool’s game. I know poets in their sixties who are still obsessed with worldly fame, getting recognition for their work, being known as a great poet. It seems to me a kind of illness. I think you write the poems that God has given you to write. And in the end, I think something has to happen so that you are the judge of your own poems. What they are answering is not some huge judgment from outside you. They’re a testament to your time on earth, and to how well you’ve stood up to it. In the case of my poems, I feel confident—not about their quality, but about their necessity in my life.” – Christian Wiman, in *Poets & Writers* (Nov. & Dec. 2010)

“Every genuine artistic intuition goes beyond what the senses perceive and, reaching beneath reality’s surface, strives to interpret its hidden mystery. The intuition itself springs from the depths of the human soul, where the desire to give meaning to one’s own life is joined by the fleeting vision of beauty and of the mysterious unity of things. All artists experience the unbridgeable gap which lies between the work of their hands, however successful it may be, and the dazzling perfection of the beauty glimpsed in the ardour of the creative moment: what they manage to express in their painting, their sculpting, their creating is no more than a glimmer of the splendour which flared for a moment before the eyes of their spirit.” – John Paul II (from his letter to artists, 1999)

“The poet lives and writes at the frontier between deep internal experience and the revelations of the outer world. There is no going back for the poet once this frontier has been reached; a new territory is visible and what has been said cannot be unsaid. The discipline of poetry is in overhearing yourself say difficult truths from which it is impossible to retreat. Poetry is a break for freedom. In a sense all poems are good; all poems are an emblem of courage and the attempt to say the unsayable; but only a few are able to speak to something universal yet personal and distinct at the same time; to create a door through which others can walk into what previously seemed unobtainable realms, in the passage of a few short lines.” – David Whyte

Moving from reading to writing:

Ten prompts for using a poem as a point of departure

1. Write a poem with the same title. For example, write your own “The World is Charged with the Grandeur of God” or “i thank you God for most this amazing.” Or write your own psalm that begins “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.”
2. Write back to the poet. Do you agree with what the poet is saying? Do you disagree? Do you have a question for the poet? Envision a dialogue between yourself and the poet, or between yourself and a character in the poem.
3. Take a line(s) that speaks to you most from a poem and use that line(s) in your own poem. Try it as the first line or the last line.
4. Choose the primary image or sensory detail of a poem (for example, the “two dark Indian ponies” in James Wright’s poem “A Blessing”) and write about that image or sensory detail.
5. Underline passages in the poem that trigger memories or experiences and *freewrite* about those experiences. A freewrite is when you just keep the pen moving on the page- writing without editing or worrying about spelling or grammar.
6. Take a line from the poem and use it as an *epigraph*. An epigraph is a short quotation which suggests the theme. This is from Mary Oliver’s “In Blackwater Woods”: *To live in this world/you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it/against your bones knowing/your own life depends on it;/and when the time comes to let it/go,/to let it go.* Use that as your epigraph and then write about whatever is evoked for you by those words.
7. Getting back to that idea of Ignatian contemplation - place yourself in a poem which sets a scene. What do you see, hear, smell, taste, feel? Use those sensory images and experiences as the beginning of your own writing.
8. Take one or two of the most powerful, resonant words in the poem and create a *word cloud*. For example, in Mary Oliver’s poem “Praying,” say you are most struck by the words “speak” and “silence.” So write the word “speak” in the middle of your page and start to free associate. What comes to mind when you hear the word “speak”? Then do the same for “silence.” Use the words you have generated as raw material for your own poem.
9. Does the poem ask a question - either explicitly or implicitly? Write a response to that question.
10. Write a sequel or a prequel to the poem. What comes before or after?

“Carry words with you and return to God.” (Hosea 14:2)

Resources for continuing the journey of Praying With Poetry

Writer’s Almanac airs every morning on NPR (National Public Radio) and includes a poem – a good way to start your day!

www.writersalmanac.org

Poetry Foundation – with huge list of poems (including a list of spiritual poems), audio and video podcasts, apps, activities for children.

www.poetryfoundation.org/

Kim Langley presents workshops on writing at Centering Space in Cleveland. Her resource page includes info on how to set up a Spiritual Poetry Circle:

www.wordspa.net/resources/

Interview with Denise Levertov’s biographer “Poetry as a Way to Prayer”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-BOdLcqnpPo>

Interviews of many poets including Elizabeth Alexander, John O’Donohue, Marie Howe, Christian Wiman, Mary Oliver, David Whyte:

www.onbeing.org

Academy of American Poets – sign up to receive a poem each day via email, materials for teachers, poetry events in your local area.

www.poets.org

Vinita Hampton Wright’s online spiritual writing retreat:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHpYSogFMvI>

Youtube channels with spoken word poetry: Button Poetry, Bowery Poetry Slam, speakeasynyc, Urbana Poetry Slam, Vancouver Poetry Slam

Some poets I like (very abridged list in no particular order!): Naomi Shihab Nye, Rainer Maria Rilke, Mary Oliver, Mary Karr, Wendell Berry, Luci Shaw, Seamus Heaney, Raymond Carver, St John of the Cross, Pablo Neruda, Kathleen Norris, John Berryman, Hafiz, Rumi, Muriel Rukeyser.