THE ART OF APPRECIATIVE ATTENTION

So much of our progress on the spiritual path comes not from gaining new knowledge but from remembering what we've always known but have forgotten. Not from learning but unlearning, clearing away the obscurations—the false beliefs and unexamined assumptions—that keep us from accessing our innate wisdom and living from our true nature. The poet Charles Wright puts it succinctly: "For knowledge, add; for wisdom, take away."

The same is true for poetry. Our first step is to let go of our preconceptions about what a poem is and how we should approach it. The idea, for example, that poems are little more than verbal mechanisms—sometimes frustratingly elusive ones—for delivering meaning. Once we let go of that conception of the poem, we can also relinquish what Elizabeth Bishop called "the immodest demand for complete comprehension." The best poems retain a mystery at their core that we will *never* fully understand, an experience ultimately beyond the grasp of the grasping mind. The poem that can be explained is not the true poem.

When I was in graduate school in the early 1980s, deconstruction was in vogue, and literature professors and PhD students would often speak of "interrogating" a poem, seemingly unaware of or unbothered by the association of interrogation with torture. It was not enough to study or appreciate a poem, you had to *interrogate* it to prove that you were a tough-minded literary critic, and more importantly to show that you held the poem in your power, regarded it with suspicion, and could make it way what you wanted it to say, by violence if necessary. This way of reading, which still persists in academic settings, is antithetical to the appreciative mode; it is fundamentally aggressive and arises from our desire to control the messy, unpredictable flow of life, to impose fixity on flux,

The practice of appreciative attention can relax the grasping mind and our anxious need to control. And this practice is refreshingly uncomplicated: we simply *attend to and savor* what we find most pleasing or compelling or resonant in the poem, what feels most alive, most lit up. It may be a line or a stanza; an image, a metaphor, a gesture; a surprising turn or stunning connection; a "lucid, inescapable rhythm," to use Wallace

Stevens's arresting phrase; an upsurge of emotion, a profound insight, a compelling tone of voice; perhaps a single perfectly chosen, unexpectedly splendid word; or perhaps the whole arc of the poem, the journey it takes us on. Whatever we respond to most strongly, the practice is to savor it, to linger, to let your appreciation deepen and expand and take you where it will. Reading poems in this way can help us slow down and stay present with what's right in front of us, on the page and in our lives.

When our orientation to the poem is appreciative rather than interpretive, when we make primary what we love rather than what we understand (or don't understand), the poem opens itself more fully to our gaze. And the more we see, the more the poem shows us. Just as a person will relax and come alive when they feel truly seen, poems begin to glow in the light of our appreciative attention. Iain McGilChrist in *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* suggests that we experience works of art as being more like people than things. Works of art, especially those that unfold in time like poetry and music, possess a quality of aliveness, an organic self-coherence, that is subtle, fluid, complex, and responsive to our awareness.

We think the world out there, poetry included, is unaffected by and indifferent to the quality of our attention, but it isn't. When we look with love at the world, when we are in an appreciative mode of consciousness, we change the world we see. With the discovery of the "observer effect," quantum physics verified what poets and mystics have known for ages: that, as Wordsworth said, we "half create" what we perceive. We know intuitively how this works in the realm of emotion. If we move through the world in a state of anger, anger will find us. When we approach the world with a loving awareness, the world gives us more to love.

It is not so much *what* we see but *how* we see. As Hari Dass Baba said: "When a pickpocket meets a saint, all he sees are his pockets." (We might also say that when a saint meets a pickpocket, all he sees is his divine essence.) The same is true for poetry. When we attune to the spiritual dimension of poetry, we begin to see that poems are by their very nature spiritual.

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In some mystical philosophies—Taoism is the prime example—the divine is conceived of not as a being but a process, a perpetual becoming, a ceaseless and mysterious generative flow rather than an unchanging supernatural entity. A contemporary expression of this idea comes from the Franciscan mystic, Richard Rohr, for whom "God is a flow, an inner aliveness, a dynamism, moving forward and toward, and never a static Zeus figure sitting on a throne, who must be placated and feared." Poems can embody this ongoing aliveness, can be a conduit for it, because poems—great poems—issue from flow states themselves, from *inspiration*, which literally means *to breathe* or *blow into* but has always implied a quality of divine guidance. So when we enter the poem's flow— and appreciative attention is the doorway through which we enter—we experience a current, or undercurrent, of this larger flow that is always all around us but which remains hidden and seemingly inaccessible. A poem is a particular manifestation of it, a particular immanence of this transcendent, generative power.

Even poems that are not spiritual in any obvious way can still carry a sense of the sacred if the poet was in a flow state when the poem came into form. The content of the poem—all that happens in it, all that can be pointed to—doesn't really matter. What matters is that the poem allows us to make contact with this creative flow, invites us to participate in it. When that happens, we get a taste of the sacred, we attune to it, we feel it. And that is why, or partly why, reading a great poem can be so transformative: it brings us into congruence with the truth of things and reminds us of our own true nature, our Buddha nature—open, untainted, alive to the moment, at peace with life's unfolding.

Though not typically understood as such, flow states in my view are intrinsically spiritual. They bring us to a kind of temporary enlightenment. In flow, we are released from all egoic constrictions, freed from grasping and aversion. The sense of separation falls away as we immerse ourselves wholeheartedly in whatever we're doing, whatever is arising in the present moment. Time slows down, or disappears altogether; the intuitive mind comes forward as the analytical mind recedes to its proper supportive role; we feel guided by something larger than ourselves that we can't control but can attune to and allow to move through us. Concentration is intense but also effortless, focused but also wide open. Self-consciousness falls away, and we feel the rightness of every spontaneous

decision. There is no disruption between the flow of our awareness and the flow of life itself. It is a blessed state.

There are many extraordinary examples of sustained flow states in poetry. All 162 lines of Wordsworth's masterpiece "Tintern Abbey" came to him while walking in the Welsh moors; he merely wrote them down after returning. Rilke wrote much of his ecstatic *Duino Elegies* over the course of several days of continuous inspiration, in the grip of what he called "a boundless storm, a hurricane of the spirit." A.R. Ammons wrote two book-length poems—*Tape for the Turn of the Year* and *Garbage: The Form of a Motion*—on rolls of adding machine tape run through a typewriter. He simply recorded what came to him each day, without premeditation or revision, trusting that he was making himself available "to the self not mine but ours," as he says in "Poetics." Which is another way of describing a flow state, a state of deep allowing in which the poet becomes a conduit for what Emerson called "the currents of the Universal Being." When asked about her creative process, Ruth Stone replied that she did not write her poems but received them. "Even as a child, I would hear a poem coming toward me from way off in the universe. I wouldn't hear it. I would feel it, and it would come right toward me. If I didn't catch it, if I didn't run in the house and write it down, it would go right through me and back into the universe." Not all poems come in this way—and of course much dedicated work precedes the creative burst—but I would argue all the best ones do.

Even a poem as brief as a haiku can arise from and bring us into contact with the pure flow of awareness. This one by Christopher Herold carries the fragrance of the sacred and reminds us of our untainted true nature.

cherry petals
a child adds a handful
to the busker's cap

How wonderful to see the child, presumably after watching adults dropping money in the hat, gather up a handful of cherry petals to make an offering. And how innocently subversive is this substitution, how meaningless and valueless money seems compared to cherry petals, a true poetic currency. The moment delights in part because that creative, generous impulse is still alive in us. It may be buried beneath layers of habit and

conditioning, but when we see it in a poem like this, we feel lit up inside. We know on some level that this is who we are and how we wish to be: childlike, unselfconscious, spontaneously responsive to life as it is.

We also delight in the poet's preserving this moment and rendering it so simply, succinctly, and beautifully, the unadorned, just this-ness of the poem itself. In response we offer our appreciative attention, our own cherry petals, and so the energetic frequency of gratitude and generosity is amplified as we appreciate the poet's appreciation of the child's appreciation of the busker's performance. Such appreciation, as I suggested in the Introduction, is not only a beneficent mind state, a joy in and of itself, but a necessary precondition for reverence to arise.

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As we practice appreciative attention with poetry, we may begin to practice it in our lives as well. We may begin to move through our world noticing more, savoring moments of unexpected delight and looking for beauty and goodness even in the most unlikely places, remembering that it's not *what* we see but *how* we see that matters most. "How hidden is the sacred," Danusha Lameris writes in "O Darkness," reminding us that the sacred is always both concealed and revealed, hidden in plain sight, as it were. Perhaps it is doubly hidden from us now, not because it is less present but because we have forgotten how to look for it, have lost the sense of wonder that allows us to see.

The Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel wrote:

> *As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. Mankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. …. Wonder or radical amazement…is therefore a prerequisite for an authentic awareness of that which is.*

This decline in wonder also occurs in the development from childhood to adulthood, as the evolution of the individual recapitulates the evolution of the species.

After flourishing in our first years of life, the sense of wonder gradually fades under the force of habit, repetition, and social conditioning. By the time we reach adulthood, we have absorbed, usually without conscious consideration, a materialist worldview founded on the assumption that whatever can't be measured doesn't exist or doesn't matter. And so the quality of wonder or "radical amazement" that Heschel identifies as central to who we are, and without which life is not worth living, is devalued, ignored, pushed to the margins. The conditions that make wonder more likely to arise are subsumed in our march toward greater efficiency and uniformity. We live in a disenchanted world.

And here is where poetry can help. We might think of poetry as an agent of re-enchantment. Wonder is at the heart of poetry, and I think that for most people, poets and readers alike, a significant relationship with poetry almost always begins in wonder. My own journey with poetry certainly did. When I started reading and writing poems in my late teens, the insufferable sameness and dullness of Nebraska was suddenly transformed as poetry taught me to actually look at the world rather than just have judgments about it. The endless cornfields I had always ignored, the rutted gravel roads, nameless creeks, nondescript grain silos, all so boring before, now seemed quietly beautiful, worth paying attention to. The landscape wasn't dramatic like the mountains of Colorado I was always pining for, but subtle. You had to *look for* what was beautiful, you had to go towards it, but it was there, waiting.

Suddenly everything repaid attention. I remember reading William Carlos Williams and walking through the dirt alleys in my neighborhood, marveling at the all things that had been banished to the bardo zone between usefulness and trash: old tools, broken furniture, rusting bikes, stacks of bricks, paint cans, dented hubcaps, etc. Such things now seemed both visually fascinating and possessed of a mysterious depth. They seemed wondrous. I wasn't aware of the Japanese aesthetic of *wabi-sabi* at the time, an aesthetic that values modest things marked by impermanence, imperfection, and melancholy, but I was intuitively aligned with those values. I loved weeds and weathered fence posts, old people, old houses—humble, discarded, neglected things. I had been around these things all my life but had never truly seen them. Poetry helped me see.

Or rather poetry restored a way of seeing I had lost, a way of being alert for and attuned to wonder, open to its many unexpected manifestations. Connie Donleycott's haiku gives us a wonderful example:

crowd of umbrellas
a child opens his
face to the rain

Such a quietly stunning image, reminiscent of the great street photography of Henri-Cartier Bresson, Vivian Maier. Garry Winogrand, and others. And such a resonant contrast: the adults open their umbrellas to keep out the rain; the child opens his face to let it in. The poem doesn't insist on the significance of the scene, or any particular meaning we might find there, but it does lift up this moment from the rush of time and show it to us.

How we choose to see makes all the difference.