

## THE SACRED PAUSE: Frost, Ryokan, Wright

When we step back and examine the workings of the mind—not only the contents of thought but the process of thinking itself—what do we find? A relentless, self-generating stream of words, images, memories, stories; repetitive loops of worries, plans, regrets, desires. We also come to see that we are not controlling our thoughts, or even in any intentional way actually thinking them. They're just happening, and happening according to deeply grooved patterns. In *The Wise Heart*, Jack Kornfield writes: "Just as the salivary glands secrete saliva, the mind secretes thoughts. The thoughts think themselves. This thought production is not bad, it's simply what minds do. A cartoon I once saw depicts a car on a long western desert highway. A roadside sign warns, 'Your own tedious thoughts next 200 miles'." Meditation allows us both to observe our habits of mind and to experience moments of spaciousness—breaks in the incessant flow of thought, rest stops along that 200 mile stretch of highway. Poetry presents another powerful way to disrupt the habitual momentum of the mind, its automatic reactions and obsessive self-concerns.

To fully enter a poem, we must first stop and step away from the more immediate demands of life and engage in an imaginative activity that has no obvious practical value. More importantly, we must shift out of our everyday consciousness—the speedy mind wrapped in its self-centered stories and projections. Poets help us experience this stopping. Indeed, a poet may be defined as one who stops, one who is inclined by temperament and training to step out of the ongoing flow of experience and look at it, and to help us do the same.

Robert Frost's most famous poem is a perfect example of the beauty of stopping.

*Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*

*Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village, though.  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.*

*My little horse must think it's queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.*

*He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sounds the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake.*

*The woods are lovely, dark and deep.  
But I have have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.  
And miles to go before I sleep.*

It's important to realize that the entire poem is predicated on the poet's decision to stop. No stopping, no poem. And that is the difference between the poet and the horse, who may be seen as representative of the force of habit, the unconscious instinct to do what it has always done. "My little horse must think it queer / To stop without a farmhouse hear...

He gives his harness bells a shake / To ask if there is some mistake.” Likewise, for most of us, caught up in getting from one place to another, there is no compelling reason to step outside the flow of time and simply notice—enter into, recognize our oneness with—what’s happening in the present moment: in this case, the woods filling up with snow, the sound of “easy wind and downy flake” inducing in the poet, and perhaps in us, a kind of reverent trance.

It’s also worth pausing to consider the furtive nature of this moment. The traveler notes, with relief perhaps, that the owner of the woods will not see him while he stops to watch the snow fall. There is a privacy and intimacy in his unobserved, secretive looking. Because if he *were* observed, it would be with puzzlement or suspicion. Like the horse, the owner of the woods would also think it odd for someone to stop and gaze at falling snow. Our cultural pragmatism cannot easily comprehend or justify the impulse to look intently at something for no “good” reason (with the exception of officially sanctioned beauty like sunsets, oceans, mountain vistas, etc.). Snow falling in lonely woods does not fall within the acceptable categories of things that warrant our full attention. Of course, we as readers do observe the poet. We look at him as he looks at the falling snow. We see the snow through his eyes and we also see his seeing, see him in the act of seeing. The poem thus gives us an example of how we might comport ourselves in a similar setting or situation. The poet’s behavior both in the poem and in the writing of the poem makes an implicit argument, a lovely one, in favor of stopping and looking.

But why? What does this stopping by woods on “the darkest evening of the year,” the winter solstice, give rise to? A moment of extraordinary depth and stillness, and a reminder that there is a world of beauty that exists independently of human will and

purpose. Frost says: “The woods are lovely dark and deep,” and we feel the attraction the poet also felt, the desire to go into those woods, to slip the world of duties and destinations, escape the constriction of egoic self-concern, and merge with that depth and stillness. The poet does not give in, but his repeating of the line “And miles to go before I sleep” suggests the difficulty of resisting that lure. (Even the snowflakes are “downy”—falling down but also evoking feathery down comforters). We feel the pull of those woods even after the poem has ended, how wonderful it would be to drop everything and immerse ourselves in such quiet amplitude, in snow that blurs and blends all things in its whiteness—a physical enactment of the seamless nature of reality, which in our habitual way of seeing appears as a series of separate things. In a sense the poem itself *becomes* the woods, an imaginative space where we can experience a deep and healing self-forgetfulness. The question then is, how long can we stop and stay with the poem, the hushed world it places us in. Can we feel the sense of wonder and reverence the poet himself has felt? Can we carry that feeling with us into the demands and distractions of daily life? Can we allow ourselves simply to stop and look?

One of Japan’s most beloved poets, Ryokan (1758-1831), lived the simple life of a hermit monk, which is itself a kind of sacred pause, a stepping out of the conventional flow of life. Known for his love of children and workmen, Ryokan embodied the “Great Fool” archetype, an eccentric, playfully subversive truth-teller unconcerned with what others thought of him. His poem “First Days of Spring” shows how stopping, allowing oneself to be stopped, can give rise to a moment of joyful communion.

*First days of Spring—the sky  
is bright blue, the sun huge and warm.  
Everything's turning green.  
Carrying my monk's bowl, I walk to the village  
to beg for my daily meal.  
The children spot me at the temple gate  
and happily crowd around,  
dragging on my arms till I stop.  
I put my bowl on a white rock,  
hang my bag on a branch.  
First we braid grasses and play tug-of-war,  
then we take turns singing and keeping a kick-ball in the air:  
I kick the ball and they sing, they kick and I sing.  
Time is forgotten, the hours fly.  
People passing by point at me and laugh:  
'Why are you acting like such a fool?'  
I nod my head and don't answer.  
I could say something, but why?  
Do you want to know what's in my heart?  
From the beginning of time: just this! just this!*

Here, it is the village children who stop the monk-poet on his round of alms-gathering, but he is *willing* to be stopped, as no doubt the children are aware. (I suspect his initial resistance is a little play-acting to make his capitulation more sweet). And unlike Frost's, Ryokan's stopping is public rather than private. He is not only observed but ridiculed. The people passing by, those who will *not* stop, laugh at him: "Why are you acting like such a fool?" Like the horse in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" who thinks it "queer to stop without a farmhouse near," these passersby can't fathom why one would waste time playing with children. But Ryokan isn't *wasting* time, he's stepping

*outside* it. “I kick the ball and they sing, they kick and I sing. / Time is forgotten, the hours fly.” Rather than answering back to those who taunt him, Ryokan speaks to us with disarming openness: “Do you want to know what’s in my heart? / From the beginning of time: Just this! just this!” Just this present moment, just what life is giving us and asking of us right now, things just as they are—*this* is where the richness of life can be found.

And how wonderful that instead of arguing with the passersby, he writes a poem, for us. That, too, is a kind of stopping. Because what do we typically do when someone insults or disrespects us? We react, more often than not, in anger and defensiveness. The ego feels attacked, and the ancient structures in the brain that evolved to ensure our survival flood the body with chemicals designed to make us take action, to fight or flee. So we answer back, either out loud, or in our heads, where the argument may be replayed for hours, days, weeks, years. But there is another possibility, and that is to pause, to create a gap, a space between the stimulus of the insult and the response of anger. Ajahn Buddhadasa calls such pauses “temporary nirvana.” We are released from the defilements of ignorance, greed, and hatred, and can rest in spacious awareness. Pausing is key to not getting caught in reaction. It allows for the possibility of a different, more generous response—in Ryokan’s case, a poem which even after nearly three centuries still speaks to us with refreshing simplicity and directness. But we needn’t write a poem to feel the benefits of such pausing. Simply *not doing* what our conditioning impels us to do is healing. And just to read the poem mindfully—with patience, curiosity, and full imaginative engagement—is to have stopped for a moment ourselves and entered the timeless experience the poem describes.

James Wright was strongly influenced by ancient Chinese and Japanese poets, and his poem "A Blessing" participates in the tradition of sudden insight which is a crucial feature of Zen poetry. "A Blessing" reveals the transcendent possibilities that arise when we pause and give ourselves over to a moment of boundary-dissolving connection.

*A Blessing*

*Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,  
Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass.  
And the eyes of those two Indian ponies  
Darken with kindness.  
They have come gladly out of the willows  
To welcome my friend and me.  
We step over the barbed wire into the pasture  
Where they have been grazing all day, alone.  
They ripple tensely, they can hardly contain their happiness  
That we have come.  
They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.  
There is no loneliness like theirs.  
At home once more,  
They begin munching the young tufts of spring in the darkness.  
I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,  
For she has walked over to me  
And nuzzled my left hand.  
She is black and white,  
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,  
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear  
That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.  
Suddenly I realize  
That if I stepped out of my body I would break  
Into blossom.*

Like Frost and Ryokan, Wright is on his way from one place to another, and like them he feels compelled to stop, to interrupt that forward momentum. When he and his friend step out of the car, they are greeted first by the twilight that “bounds softly forth on the grass,” an image which evokes the luminous nature of the moment and the liminal space the travelers have entered: the transition between day and night where mystical experience most often occurs. The three long ‘o’ sounds in “bounds softly forth” create a sense of buoyancy, of slowing down and opening. The horses also welcome them. “They can hardly contain their happiness that we have come.” Because the travelers have stopped and opened themselves in this way, the world responds through the loving presence of the horses. It is as if their stopping has called them forth. Then the poet and his friend step over the barbed wire fence, a transgression—they are literally trespassing—that initiates the movement toward the poem’s ecstatic conclusion. That initial *stepping over* leads to the poem’s final *stepping out* of the body. It’s easy to treat the line—“We step over the barbed wire into the pasture”—as purely informational, but it enacts, literally and figuratively, the non-separation that the poem is ultimately about, the dissolution of the boundary between human and non-human, self and other, body and spirit. The poet is shedding the limitations of the egoic, self-centered way of being in the world.

Crossing that boundary and entering the field allows Wright to do more than look at the horses; he makes contact with one, caressing its “long ear / that is delicate as the skin over a girl’s wrist.” Because Wright has stopped, because he has made such loving contact with the horses, he has been brought to a moment of transformative insight, of satori. “Suddenly I realize / that if I stepped out of my body I would break / into blossom.”



What an astonishing thing to say! I've read this poem dozens of times over many years, and that final assertion, and the authority with which Wright makes it, still shocks me, the strangeness and absolute rightness of it. But what would it mean to step out of the body and break into blossom? It's interesting that Wright does not tell us—only that he knows that *if* he did step out of his body, he *would* break into blossom. It's the *knowing* that he realizes and enacts in the poem. He knows that he knows. Or as the Thai Forest master Ajahn Chah would say, he has become “the one who knows.” He sees that being in a body that appears separate from all things is an illusion. Our capacity for boundary-dissolving experiences, like the one Wright describes, proves it. The breaking into blossom itself cannot be described, only approached through metaphor. It is a post-linguistic feeling, a state quite beyond the reach of words. And so Wright only points to it, extending it as a possibility for us. Such transcendence, the poem implies, is always available, that step is always there, waiting to be taken, but only if we stop our ongoing momentum and let the feeling of wonder, reverence, and loving awareness arise in us. We might also say that in the act of writing Wright has stepped out of his body and broken into the blossom of the poem—that he has dissolved the boundary between human and blossom—which is itself an invitation for us to do the same, to enter the poem as Wright enters the pasture, to be there with him in that shimmering moment by the roadside on the way to Rochester, Minnesota.

This is the beauty and the magic of poems: they help us see and feel the beauty and magic of the world when we allow ourselves to hit pause on our habitual thoughts and behaviors. And when we enter poems fully, when we *experience* them rather than *think*

*about* what they mean, they can release us from our sense of separateness and from the kind of obsessive self-concern that leads inevitably to suffering. In that way, great poems are needed now more than ever, as we grow more and more removed from natural processes—and from actual physical contact with the world—and as we identify more and more strongly with our thoughts, the relentless momentum and reactivity of the mind. A great poem can stop that momentum for a moment and help us see that *any* moment, fully experienced, is a gateway out of the realm of time and change into timeless awareness.