

## **The Calling** by *Jan Lee Ande*

What does it mean to be a poet in today's world? What concerns rouse us, we who define our poetics as spiritual, ecological, religious? Tens of thousands of people now write poetry. What begins as a pilgrimage may evolve into a spiritual lifework. We practice poetry as we pray, contemplate, meditate. We take holy orders in the hallowed hall of the self.

Poetry in the West sits in a small room, the dimensions of a confessional rather than a vast cathedral, a marginalized art gathering few alms and a small congregation. Dropped onto the offering plate—a gift of the imagination. If novices, we ask for guidance. “Go into yourself. Find out the reason that commands you to write,” responds Rainer Maria Rilke, “see whether it has spread its roots into the very depths of your heart.”<sup>1</sup>

Jalal Al-Din Rumi, the thirteenth-century Persian poet, has become wildly popular in America. Rumi created over seventy thousand verses in a mere twenty-five years. Revered by Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, and Christians of the time, recited from India to Afghanistan for seven centuries—Rumi at last translated into accessible, engaging English by Coleman Barks. But who among us has been transfigured into a Rumi, whirling around a pole, and speaking ecstatic poems recorded by devotees?

So we breathe deeply, put our fingers to pen or keyboard, coax words to travel our bodies into being. Occasionally, the grace of inspired words.

Words rise from personal and at times collective realms to spill out into the world. Through imagination—termed by William Blake “The Divine Vision”—forms are envisioned, brought into being. Poems widen the way we think about the great chain of life. Poetry can create a new worldview and a renewed world.

Poetry functions as a ritual of communion between word and person, logos and cosmos. Through our writing, we help to resurrect the whole, to heal the long imposed rift between body and mind, human and divine. Psyche and matter were split in two by Western thought, the world carved apart. This suggests a stunning potential.

As poet and essayist Martha Heyneman writes:

The lost language of the whole, in which a whole world will have ultimately to be presented, is the language of poetry. By that I mean language that does not necessarily make use of rhyme and meter but that embodies ideas and feeling in sensory images ... and incarnates what is beyond opposites....

True metaphors can urge readers to make imaginative leaps, connect things previously thought unrelated. Words are beads of a rosary, bones of a Buddhist mala, taut knots of an Orthodox prayer rope. We value the power of words as in 1 John 1 “In the beginning was the Word.” The concentration of early scribes who began each new copy of the Torah believing should one word be changed—our world would end. Many ancient scripts, vastly different systems of writing, were or are considered living forces, healing energies. Sanskrit with its bija mantras (sacred vowels), the biblical Hebrew alphabet’s (mystical consonants). Poets such as G rard de Nerval, Arthur Rimbaud, and Walt Whitman knew this magical power.

Words and letters themselves, whether modern or from ages past, hold symbols and qualities that we may discover or construct. As contemporary poets we write using words that are part of everyday language, with layers of meanings and implications. From this hodgepodge we choose each word with care, place it just so, to convene from compressed language: a stained glass window, a prayer of praise, a blessing that may fit in the palm of a hand.

The way of the poet pulses in the blood. We surrender to the work on ourselves. Watching my father struggle for a decade with Parkinson's disease, witnessing his deterioration, listening to anguished words, led to a series of poems. Recalling his journey through this lifetime, how he held his younger daughter as she died, led to the Lisa poems. I write about a father at the end of a long life and a three-year-old girl dying of stomach cancer. The poems initiated me into the mysteries of suffering and, oddly, celebration.

Poetry expresses praise and lament, ecstasy and sorrow. Elegies, poems for the deceased, convey both grief (the state of suffering loss) and mourning (the active experience and healing of that loss). Sometimes poetry may be a collective burial oration. Archetypal psychologist James Hillman suggests at this instant we might be present at funeral rites:

Suppose we entertain the idea that the world is *in extremis*, suffering from an acute, perhaps fatal, disorder at the edge of extinction. Then I would claim that what the world needs most is radical and original extremes of feeling and thinking in order for its crisis to be met with equal intensity.

Poetry comes from, and gives expression to, the far edges of emotion and insight. We wake to a planet that touches us at every point. A poem written in first person can speak to whole cultures and eras. Poetry tracks the collective memory of our species. Poems chronicle the human spirit across time and place, at peace and during war. Poetry honors the sacred and profane.

Writing poems strengthens our place in the web of life. By naming the writing of poems a “spiritual practice,” we respect the lineage passed down, generation to generation, over millennia. .

Writing poems can renew us as well as consume us—not an art for the faint of heart. Essayist Bruce Bawer warns what a devotion to poetry at its most intense might mean:

If poetry overshadowed everything for them, it was because poetry was, to them, the ultimate form of knowledge—the best form, because it contained all the others.... To write poetry was to perform a physics experiment, to conduct a Freudian analysis, to hold High Mass. It was to plunge into the abyss, to make a solitary entrance into the unknown. Poetry was dangerous, harrowing—even as it renewed life, it threatened it.

So the call continues. Some of us are inspired to write early on. For others, our passion and devotion comes years later. Yet when chosen by poetry, to turn our back on it leaves us feeling empty, anxious, as though we have forgotten a very important series of dream, a recurring message.

- 1—"Go into yourself...." Rainer Maria Rilke. Stephen Mitchell, trans. Letters to a Young Poet. (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), 6.
- 2—"Through imagination, what William Blake...." S. Foster Damon. A Blake Dictionary. (Providence RI: Brown U, 1965, 1973), 195.
- 2—"The lost language of the whole..." Martha Heyneman. The Breathing Cathedral (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1993), 25.
- 3—"Suppose we entertain the idea..." James Hillman and Michael Ventura. We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy—and the World's Getting Worse. (New York: Harper, 1992), 151.
- 4—"If poetry overshadowed everything..." Bruce Bawer relates this (in a specific context) in Prophets & Professors: Essays on the Lives and Works of Modern Poets. (Brownsville OR: Story Line Press, 1995), 120-21.