

POETRY AND BEING:
METAPHOR, PARADOX AND THE AWAKENED LIFE

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Before I get into the substance of my talk I should say a couple of things about myself and where I'll be coming from. First of all, I'm speaking to you as a poet and as a teacher and somebody who has practiced Zen for the last eighteen years or so, and I do want to put the emphasis on the word 'practice.' I'm still practicing, and maybe one of these days I'll get it right. Let me tell a little story by way of introduction: About twenty-five years ago I was in London. Like many visitors to London, I went to Hyde Park, to Speakers'Corner, and I happened to see a religious speaker there. He was wailing away at the crowd and telling them about Hell and damnation and what they should do and what they shouldn't do and basically laying out a very clear and narrow interpretation of the moral law as he understood it. The whole time he was speaking there was an old guy right in front of him in the audience, who stood with arms defiantly folded across his chest just looking up at him skeptically, and every time the preacher finished one of his moral pronouncements, the old guy would say loudly and in varying tones of derision, 'How do *you* know?'

To me that story sort of captures a sense of where we sometimes find ourselves in our lives: how *do* we know what we know? That experience twenty-five years ago in Hyde Park has stayed with me all of these years and still resonates. How do you know what you know and how do you live your life out of that knowledge?

What I want to suggest (before I get into the real substance of the talk) is: *that's* what's behind what I'm saying. I'm like everybody else; I'm trying to do what I can to live a good life, not always knowing what all that means, though I think poetry may have something to do with it; clearly religion does. I want to talk about those things briefly. What I will do, then, is to share with you poems from two separate sources. One of them you might call traditional: poems from ancient China, from India, from Persia, from 19th Century America. Many of those you'll be familiar with, but then I'm also going to share from some American poets who are alive today and whose work you might not be so familiar with. Before I go any further, though, I'd just like to acknowledge a few of my main sources here. A lot of the poems that I'll be referring to and quoting from come from about five or

six anthologies that have been published recently in the States. I don't know if they've made their way over here yet. One is by Steven Mitchell, *The Enlightened Heart: An Anthology of Sacred Poetry*; another by Kent Johnson and Craig Paulenich, *Beneath a Single Moon: Buddhism in Contemporary American Poetry*; another by Daniel Halpern, *Holy Fire: Nine Visionary Poets and the Quest for Enlightenment*; and, finally, Robert Bly's *The Soul is Here for Its Own Joy: Sacred Poems from Many Cultures*.

What I want to do in this talk is to explore the relationship of what I am very loosely going to call Being and Poetry and Religion, and I want to perhaps begin with a few little definitions, sort of working provisional definitions that we can agree on tonight. I'll begin with Religion. As you may know, 'religion' comes from the Latin *religio* and *re-ligare* which mean to tie back or reunite or rejoin. So the question of course becomes, tie back, reunite or rejoin with what? Perhaps with something larger than ourselves however we define that, whether it be Self with a capital 'S,' whether it be God, whether it be the eternal moment, whether it be divine beatitude. Different traditions talk about it in different ways, but people throughout history have had the experience of *being*, have had the experience of something larger than their ordinary everyday existence - or, more accurately perhaps - what we normally *call* our ordinary everyday existence. People who call themselves artists or poets and who have also had these experiences inevitably try to write about them or try to represent them in some artistic way. In trying to do that, they're successful or they're not. My measure of success for people who have some glimpse into whatever you want to call it, say 'essential reality,' and then try to write about it is whether that glimpse comes across to the reader or to the listener. Does the reader or the listener have something like that experience, too, something close to what the writer or the artist was in touch with? If they do then I think that could be called successful.

I'm going to suggest that poetry in its highest form reports back to us something from those encounters with being or essential reality, God, Self, or whatever you prefer to call it. The highest form of poetry reports that back to us and that's, if you will, the thesis I want to explore. Of course, I also know that poetry does a lot of other things - and, like most poets, I've done those in my poems. Only very occasionally have I had something that you would call a 'glimpse' to report on. We've all had these glimpses or epiphanal moments, of course. The poet is simply the one who writes up the report. Let me just read you something from a friend of mine from the

United States, Steve Kowitz, who's the author of a book called *In the Palm of Your Hand: The Poet's Portable Workshop*. He writes,

'Surely one of poetry's sacred aims - indeed one of the central aims of all art - is to lift us out of our sleep into the actual world of this present moment. Art then is a way of remembering our real selves, or stepping out of the busy mind and back into the real world of trees, birds, clouds, people, chairs. The extraordinary, unspeakable presence of everything that exists. The sense of our identity with all creation. And once we do enter the present we are asked to see the world more vividly, more wholly, our emotions open to the miraculousness of the ordinary.'

It's this 'miraculousness of the ordinary' that I want to focus on a little bit and have that be a theme we come back to over and over again in the examples of the poems that I'll read to you. And there's something paradoxical about that: the sacred in the mundane, the enlightened in the deluded, the extraordinary in the ordinary. And yet this is what our life is. Obviously we have only the life that we have, and it's only rarely that for most of us we see what a blessing and gift it is, what a miracle it is.

So to get a little bit technical now, what I'm going to do is to take the notion of metaphor and the notion of paradox as two very natural strategies that happen in language but especially in poetry, and use them to point to how it is that a poet - particularly a poet who is trying to report on the experience of being, if you will - resorts to metaphor and paradox as a natural way of talking about the ineffable, reporting on the unreportable, saying the unsayable. In order to do that I want to begin with a couple of images. These are images that I want to lay out as a sort of a ground for what I'll be talking about here. You may be familiar with them. One is the image of Indra's net. Now this is altogether an image, a metaphor and a paradox. There's a paradox in the metaphor and there's a metaphor in the image. In Vedanta, the notion of Indra's net is that the universe is made up of strings that are connected as a net; it's called the universal net. That's the metaphor: the universe is a net. Where the strings intersect and join each other, we're asked to imagine a silver or metallic or mirror-surfaced ball at each of the intersections of the strings. In each of those surfaces is reflected every other mirror and its reflections so there are reflections within reflections within reflections. Ultimately you can take that image and draw out of it, or abstract from it, the notions of *interconnectedness* and *interpenetration*. So everything is contained within everything else. That's, of course, a paradox. How can it be? It's easy for us to see how the part is contained within the whole, but this paradoxical image/metaphor is asking us to see that the

whole is contained within the part. Anybody can find a drop of water in the ocean, but can you find the ocean in a drop of water?

So that's one image, and it's both a metaphor for the world and it's a paradoxical metaphor. The other image I want to refer to comes up in Steven Mitchell's book. He talks in the foreword about the choices he made when he wanted to include poems in his book. He writes that unlike most religious poetry these are poems not of people who are longing for something but people who've had a glimpse of something. So they're within the circle, if you think of Robert Frost's image of the secret in the middle an us ordinary mortals on the outside. But then he goes on to say a very paradoxical thing, which I think is nonetheless true, and that is that this circle has an infinite circumference, so obviously we're thrown into the notion that there is no circumference and everything is included in the circle, and that gives us the paradox, in Zen terms, of the enlightened existing in the deluded, or even at one with the deluded. So in the poems that I'm going to be talking to you about and quoting to you from, there's a sense in my choosing them that they're all included within this boundless circle. Yet a tricky distinction has to be made, so you'll forgive me for being paradoxical about paradoxes but I don't know how else to do it.

To get back for a moment to how metaphor and how paradox work in the poetry that reports the experience of being or the experience of essential nature: A metaphor, if you take it apart, is saying 'this is that.' We could talk about similes and the convenience of using *like* or *as*. It doesn't really matter; the bottom line perception or metaphorical insight is 'this is that.' Perhaps on some fundamental level, if we do live in a world or a *universe* where things are one, or as they say in Zen, not-two, then that becomes not only a metaphorical statement but a literally accurate statement. And, of course, paradoxes are statements that simply say that something that seems opposite from what it could be isn't, that seeming contraries are really not contraries at all, that on some fundamental level are identities. One of the key notions in most spiritual teachings is that you have to see through the contraries. Seeing things in dualistic ways, in constant opposition to each other, is a limited way of seeing, so you have to see through that. It just seems natural to me that poets in trying to report the ineffable have to resort to language that goes beyond ordinary, normal categories - hence metaphor and paradox.

Let me give you a few short quotes to warm up to my theme. This is from a book called *The Breathing Cathedral: Feeling Our Way into a Living Cosmos*, by Martha Heyneman: 'True poetry (or any other true art) presents

samsara in such a way that you can see nirvana in it, without any need of explanation.¹ Emerson puts it like this: 'We lie in the lap of immense intelligence which makes us receivers of its truths and organs of its activity.' Notice even when you start to talk in these terms you have to resort to metaphor and you have to say things that are on the surface very paradoxical. Karlfried Graf Durckheim writes: 'The forms we make and the forms we are are alive only when being shines through them.'² And finally, Emerson again, 'Jove nods to Jove from behind each of us.'³

It's this shining through of being, then, that I want to touch on as much as I can in the little time we have together, by way of sharing a few examples. Let me begin with some of the traditional examples. Li Po, one of the most revered of the ancient Chinese poets:

The birds have vanished into the sky,
and now the last cloud drains away.
We sit together, the mountain and me,
until only the mountain remains.⁴

Sometimes the simple experience of being in nature can cause what I'm calling 'the experience of being' to occur. Here Li Po is talking about the sense of the loss of the ego, the loss of the ordinary self, the merging into pure seeing, pure hearing, or any other of the senses. The you you normally think of as yourself simply disappears. This short poem is a nice example of a moment of pure non-dualism.

Layman P'ang, another ancient Chinese poet, wrote:

My daily affairs are quite ordinary,
but I am in total harmony with them.
I don't hold onto anything, don't reject anything;
nowhere an obstacle or conflict.
Who cares about wealth and honor?
Even the poorest thing shines.
My miraculous power and spiritual activity:
Drawing water and carrying wood.⁵

The point he's making is that *this life* we live right here and right now *is* the blessed life, if you will; it is the life beyond which there is no other life. It all take place in the present moment; it's all right here, in the very ordinary things that we do in our lives. Daily life *is* the enlightened life because when seen clearly, the moment is eternal.

Rumi, whom I'm sure many of you are familiar with, writes in a wonderfully brief and paradoxical poem:

I have lived on the lip
of insanity, wanting to know reasons,
knocking on a door. It opens.
I've been knocking from the inside.

That perceptual shift, the paradox of the in and the out, and how the in and the out have to be transcended, and when they are, there's no longer any problem. How could there be a problem? The categories are gone. This is one of my favorites of his:

The Elusive Ones

They're lovers again, sugar dissolving in milk.

Day and night, no difference. The sun *is* the moon:
an amalgam. Their gold and silver melt together.

This is the season when the dead branch and the green
branch are the same branch.

The cynic bites his finger because he can't understand.
Omar and Ali on the same throne,
two kings in one belt!

Nightmares fill with light like a holiday.
Men and angels speak one language.
The elusive ones finally meet.

The essence and evolving forms
run to meet each other like children
to their father and mother.

Good and evil, dead and alive, everything blooms
from one natural stem.

You know this already, I'll stop.
Any direction you turn it's one vision.

Shams, my body is a candle touched by fire.⁶

This is a poem full of metaphors and paradoxes, obviously. Here the poet is reporting on some ineffable experiences, some kind of transcendent contact. The metaphors are all about dissolving, about disappearing, melting, merging. Powerful images, powerful metaphors for that type of experience.

Kabir writes of the paradox of the hidden and the obvious, the 'open secret', as it were. He also writes of the identity of the absolute and the relative, the non-dual:

Are you looking for me? I am in the next seat.

My shoulder is against yours.
You will not find me in stupas, not in Indian shrine rooms,
nor in synagogues, nor in cathedrals:
not in masses, nor kirtans, not in legs winding around your
own neck, nor in eating nothing but vegetables.
When you really look for me you will see me instantly -
you will find me in the tiniest house of time.
Kabir says: Student, tell me, what is God?
He is the breath inside the breath.⁷

Miribai, another poet from the Indian sub-continent around the first half of the 16th century, writes in a joyful, even playful way about the profound religious experience of getting in touch with something so powerful it becomes all-consuming:

Why Mira Can't Go Back to Her Old House

The colors of the dark one have penetrated Mira's body; all the other colors washed out.
Making love with the Dark One and eating little: those are my pearls and my carnelians .
Meditation beads and the forehead streak, those are my scarves and my rings.
That's enough feminine wiles for me. My teacher taught me this.
Approve me or disapprove me: I praise the Mountain Energy night and day.
I take the path that ecstatic human beings have taken for centuries.
I don't steal money, I don't hit anyone. What will you charge me with?
I have felt the swaying of the elephant's shoulders; and now you want me to climb on a jackass? Try to be serious.⁸

Here's a short one by Angelus Silesius, seventeenth century European poet:

God, whose love and joy
are present everywhere,
can't come to visit you
unless you aren't there.⁹

This refers to one of the most profound paradoxes: the absence of the normal self 'allows for' the presence of something else. It's hard to name what that 'else' is, though he, of course, names it God.

Ryokan, an eighteenth and nineteenth century Japanese poet, gives us a wonderful poem that expresses the extraordinary within the ordinary, the paradox of loss and gain. He puts that whole seeming contradiction up for us to look at:

In all the directions of the universe,
there is only one truth.
When we see clearly, the great teachings are the same.

What can ever be lost? What can be attained?
If we attain something, it was there from the beginning of time.
If we lose something, it is hiding somewhere near us.
Look: this ball in my pocket:
can you see how priceless it is?¹⁰

Ghalib, a nineteenth century Indian poet of Turkish ancestry gives us another vision of the paradox of the whole and the part:

Even at prayer, our eyes look inward;
If the gate to the holy is shut, we just turn away.

The One is only the One, everyone knows -
What mirroring icon could hold it face to face?

Held back unvoiced grief bruises the heart;
Not reaching the river, a raindrop is swallowed by dust.

If a story brings only tears and not blood to the eyes,
It is simply a lover's tale.

Whoever can't see the whole in every part play's at blind man's buff;
A wise man tastes the entire Tigris at every sip.¹¹

I wouldn't be doing justice to the Western tradition if I didn't include someone like Walt Whitman. Here's a brief section from 'Song of my Self':

Trippers and askers surround me,
People I meet... the effect upon me of my early life... of the ward and city I live in... of the nation,
The latest news... discoveries, inventions, societies... authors old and new,
My dinner, dress, associates, looks, business, compliments, dues,
The real or fancied indifference of some man or woman I love,
The sickness of one of my folks - or of myself...
or ill-doing... or loss or lack of money or depressions or exultations,
These come to me days and nights and go from me again,
But they are not the Me myself.

Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,
Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary,
Looks down, is erect, bends an arm on an impalpable certain rest,
Looks with its side-curved head, curious what will come next,
Both in and out of the game, and watching and wondering at it.

That 'both in and out of the game' is one of the ultimate paradoxes, and has to do with some sort of glimpse of the eternal, a tapping into what has been called the witness consciousness, that which sees us over our own shoulder while we carry on our daily affairs.

And now here's a little poem by Emily Dickinson by way of contrast in style, in which she puts the paradox of the concrete and the abstract before us. What's real? Matter? Energy? What contains what?

The brain - is wider than the Sky -
For - put them side by side -
The one the other will contain
With ease - and You - beside -

The brain is deeper than the sea -
For - hold them - Blue to Blue -
The one the other will absorb -
As sponges - Buckets - do -

The brain is just the weight of God -
For - Heft them - Pound for Pound -
And they will differ - if they do -
As Syllables from Sound.

Someone was talking earlier in the conference about exile, and how most of us in one way or another feel that, feel exiled, either literally exiled because of our upbringing or feel some fundamental sort of exile. That seems to be part of the human condition, and the experience that these poets are talking about is something that cuts through that exile (to use a metaphor again) and gives them a sense of homecoming, a return to something fundamental.

I'm going to start moving into some contemporary American poets. Galway Kinnell is among other things a fine poet of the observation of nature. His observations of nature, though, always go deeper than mere description:

Daybreak

On the tidal mud, just before sunset,
dozens of starfishes
were creeping. It was
as though the mud were a sky
and enormous, imperfect stars
moved across it as slowly
as the actual stars cross heaven.
All at once they stopped,
and as if they had simply
increased their receptivity
to gravity they sank down
into the mud; they faded down
into it and lay still; and by the time
pink of sunset broke across them
they were as invisible
as the true stars at daybreak.¹²

Sometimes we can get a glimpse into something that seems beyond our ordinary everyday existence when we're in the face of danger. This is a poem by a wonderful American poet, Mary Oliver. Some of you I'm sure know her work. She recounts the story of how she avoided being killed by an alligator. It's called 'Alligator Poem':

I knelt down
at the edge of the water,
and if the white birds standing
in the tops of the trees whistled any warning,
I didn't understand,
I drank up to the very moment it came
crashing toward me,
It's tail flailing
like a bundle of swords,
slashing the grass,
and the inside of its cradle-shaped mouth
gaping,
and rimmed with teeth -
and that's how I almost died
of foolishness
in beautiful Florida.
But I didn't.
I leaped aside, and fell,
and its streamed past me, crushing everything in its path
as it swept down to the water
and threw itself in,
and, in the end,
this poem isn't about foolishness
but about how I rose from the ground
and saw the world as if for the second time,
the way it really is.
The water, that circle of shattered glass,
healed itself with a slow whisper
and lay back
with the back-lit light of polished steel,
and the birds, in the endless waterfalls of the trees,
shook open the snowy pleats of their wings, and drifted away,
while, for keepsake, and to steady myself,
I reached out,
I picked the wildflowers in the grass around me -
blue stars
and blood-red trumpets
on long green stems -
for hours in my trembling hands they glittered
like fire.

Steve Kowitz is a wonderful poet, and someone I count among my dear friends. This poem is an experience of, again, ordinary life seen clearly, and therefore miraculous and luminous. The Cuyamacas are a little mountain range outside of San Diego where I live:

Dusk in the Cuyamacas

It was that tangerine
& golden
sepia light
spilling over the Cuyamacas
- each leaf
of the manzanita
chiseled in space -
that shook me out of my dreams
till I woke again
to my own life:
everything shimmering
everything just as it is.¹³

Joyce Carol Oates, better known for her novels, writes a short poem that acknowledges the ineffable mystery of a single thing, its 'suchness' or 'thisness':

That

single pear in its ripeness
this morning, swollen-ripe
its texture rough, rouged

more demanding upon the eye than the tree
branching about it
more demanding than the ornate drooping limbs
of a hundred perfect trees

yet flawed: marked as with a fingernail
a bird's jabbing beak
the bruise of rot
benign as a birthmark
a family blemish

still, its solitary stubborn weight is a bugle
a summoning of brass
the pride of it subdues the orchard
more astonishing than the acres of trees
the army of ladders
the workers' stray shouts

that first pear's weight
exceeds the season's tonnage
costly beyond estimation
a prize, a riddle
a feast.

I'll read one of my own poems and end with one by Gary Snyder. There's a little story behind this poem of mine. When I was growing up here in Sydney in the '50s, my mother worked in a raincoat factory. There was a man there apparently who had some kind of mental disorder which

caused him to break out into song every now and again, inappropriately - right in the middle of work, right at his desk, in the restaurant - and he didn't know he was doing it. He would sing for a minute or so, everything would stop, or people would carry on around him, and then he'd come back to the present moment with no memory of what he'd done. The poem came about when I heard of another incident of a New York city bus driver who reported for work one day, got in his bus, and then woke up two or three days later in Florida, still in the bus, with no memory of how he'd gotten down there. I guess psychologists call this phenomena a 'disassociational fugue' or something like that. Anyway, my poem is called 'The Man who had Singing Fits', and the paradox here has something to do with the rational and the irrational and the mystery behind it all:

He would begin unexpectedly anywhere,
bubbling into song at the Woolworths cash register,
in the elevator, in the restaurant
as the waitress approached with coffee,
in board meetings.

The pale canary of his heart chirped
from its cage while all around him
we woke, momentarily, startled
out of our cultural trance,
too amazed to be embarrassed.

His family and friends were used to these fits,
and we too became charmed
by his soft voice, the lilting, gentle song
that never quite made sense
but had something to do
with a quiet, confused love.

He would sing for a half a minute,
and then he'd be back among us, no memory
of his departure or return, no memory
of the stream he dipped us all into,
that one running along just under
the surface of anything you and I
think we understand.¹⁴

In American schools it's customary to say a pledge of allegiance, which goes something like, 'I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America...' and so on. Gary Snyder takes the echo of that narrow nationalistic pledge and expands it. It's entitled 'For All':

Ah, to be alive
on a mid-September morn
fordling a stream
barefoot, pants rolled up,

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holding boots, pack on,
sunshine, ice in the shallows,
northern rockies.

Rustle and shimmer of icy creek waters
stones turn underfoot, small and hard as toes
cold nose dripping
singing inside
creek music, heart music,
smell of sun on gravel.

I pledge allegiance
I pledge allegiance to the soil
of Turtle Island,
and to the beings who thereon dwell
one ecosystem
in diversity
under the sun
With joyful interpenetration for all.¹⁵

I hope that by pointing to some of these poems you've had some glimpse into the being that we all are at all times.

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- ⁸ Halpern, p. 63.
- ⁹ Mitchell, p. 87.
- ¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 97.
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