

Poems that speak to life

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About ten years ago, I returned to church after a long hiatus. What drove me back to church was not a recovery of earlier beliefs or even an articulation of new ones. In fact, if I am honest, I was more ambivalent about Christianity than ever.

What compelled me to the pews was a hunger for poetry shared in community. Church was the only place I knew of where people got together on a regular basis and shared ancient poetry. I wanted--I needed--to be a part of that.

I found poetry in the canticles, in the prayers, in the psalms, in the fiery readings from prophets. It was in the songs that Paul wrote to people at Corinth and in the parables that Jesus used to puzzle his listeners. Poetry was in the hymns and in the simple words people offered as prayer requests. The whole service appeared to me like one big exercise in surrender to poetry.

To be more precise, it wasn't simply poetry I needed. I could have found that in books. It was a kind of poetry that wove people together rather than drove them apart, that included each individual in something greater than the sum of his or her parts.

I recently explored this passion further at the [Glen Workshop](#). I challenged myself to the poetry seminar with Gregory Orr. One of the assignments that Orr--founder of the creative writing program at the University of Virginia--gave us was to create a "personal anthology" of poems. Find ten poems--two can be songs--that speak to your own heart and life.

He was careful to say that we should not choose the ten *best* poems we've ever encountered. The exercise is not about aesthetic judgment. It is about what poems have articulated the music of your own soul. Poetry, Orr said repeatedly, is a human birthright. Humans of all cultures, times and places are making poems with their words and lives.

Taking on this exercise is instructive and difficult. I am currently sorting through poems, psalms and songs that have all spoken to me at different times and in different places. So far, I have a list of four that I am certain of and about 20 that are candidates. Here is one that has settled into my anthology, from the Haiku poet Basho:

A cool fall night—
getting dinner, we peeled
eggplants, cucumbers.

What poems would go in your anthology?