

Poetry for the sake of creation

In the face of unprecedented assaults on planet Earth, what good is poetry?

by [Debra Dean Murphy](#) in the [September 26, 2018](#) issue



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It is the strangest of times. Alarming effects of climate change are being felt all over the world, while many, including those in power, consider climate science conspiratorial fiction. Even the believers, the data analysts warn, fail to appreciate the scale of the catastrophes that await us.

And then there's poetry. Which I suggest is a great gift for such a time as this.

How can this be? It's not intuitive that poetry, so mystifying to many, has any material value for the work necessary to confront the unprecedented assaults on planet Earth by its human inhabitants. And not ecological devastation only: What good is poetry in the face of poverty, racism, war, and every other social ill?

In the Gospel of John is the well-known story of a woman caught in the act of adultery. The Pharisees, you'll recall, are keen to trap Jesus, but he refuses to play a part in their contrived theatrics and instead, in silence, bends down and writes in the dirt.

This writing, says the poet Seamus Heaney, is like poetry: it doesn't proffer a solution or propose to be effective or useful. (Echoes here of Auden's famous dictum that poetry makes nothing happen.) Jesus' unknown words are a kind of generative disruption, the opening of a space into which something new and unexpected can emerge. Poetry, too, is like this, concentrating our attention so that we might see what is before us (words, the world) recomposed as something sound, whole, undiminished.

Such a focused act of attention is ultimately, I would argue, an act of love. By love I mean (at least) what philosopher Iris Murdoch means: the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real. This is the love that perceives another's integrity and wills their well-being. In this way, the disruptive space and the generative act of attention that poetry make possible become gifts whereby we might imagine the wounded world, like a mistreated woman restored to dignity and safety, reconciled and returned to itself.

Or said another way: a poem is a kind of dwelling place, intimate and durable, and the disciplined reading of poetry—the willingness to abide with and in good poems—can shape and sharpen one's perception of the world. The reader indwells that opened-up space where the act of attention, of love, is also the art of seeing truthfully.

The regular reading of poetry also cultivates sensibilities that can help us indwell our other habitations with more integrity and intentionality. By *sensibility* I mean a kind of orientation and responsiveness to the world, a posture born of discernment and a desire for understanding. A sustained engagement with poetry can cultivate such sensibilities as an openness to wonder, the willingness to be surprised, and an attitude of humility. For example, a poem's form can nurture an acute perception of the giftedness of limits: the recognition that constraints, like those inherent in a sonnet or sestina, are a precondition for creativity, freedom, and flourishing.

Once boundaries are acknowledged, in poetry and in life, as what Wendell Berry calls inducements to elegance, to fullness of relationship and meaning, we

encounter a truth with implications for how we navigate the world: genuine freedom is rooted in relationship and reciprocity. We exercise our freedom *for* the sake of a life directed toward love of God, neighbor, and all creation, not primarily as freedom *from* hindrance or constraint. This is a sensibility that discerns and embraces the good of some limits (our and the planet's finiteness, say) instead of denying or chafing at them.

Freedom as free rein, by contrast, is narrow, small, often paranoid and stingy—fencing out the neighbor, feeding narcissistic whims. This view of freedom accounts for much of the harm humans have done to the earth and its inhabitants.

We will not save “the environment.” We might, though, help to heal a particular river or species. But first we have to know the river (the Greenbrier or the Mississippi) and the species (the Virginia big-eared bat or the Cheat Mountain salamander). For we don't love “the environment”; we love places and plants and people and other creatures.

The terror humans have unleashed on mountains and oceans and vulnerable populations, whether through ignorance or greed, is a kind of unmaking of the world, an act of de-creation and a defacing of the *imago Dei* in us—our own capacity for world-making. The poet, too, is a maker of worlds (*poiesis* = to make). With words the poet renders a world and brokers a linguistic exchange: we read the words and the words read us. In that generative disruption, that clearing of a space, an order of things is revealed—no matter the poem's subject matter. And through certain sensibilities sharpened over time, we are moved to attend to the disorder we have visited on the world around us.

Can poetry be read for creation's sake? There are no formulas for it, no guarantees, and plenty of ways to do it badly—such is the risk art takes. But poems invite us into a relationship of intimate knowing, into that space of concentration and clarity, into the intricate dance of word and world. In accepting those invitations, we may find ourselves initiated into practices, forms of wisdom, and ways of life that lead us to care more deeply about and act more purposefully on behalf of our neighbors, human and nonhuman, with whom we share this one beautiful world.

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