Poetry as Prayer [1]

January 27, 2014 Writing and Faith [2]
About Poetry [3]

Theme Essay by Ellen McGrath Smith

Forget the Jackpot—Writing as a Sacred Act



I've given poetry readings where less than a handful of people were present. It's a humbling experience. It’s also a deeply familiar experience.

"Poetry is useless," poet Geoffrey Nutter said in a 2013 interview, "but it is useless the way the soul is useless—it is unnecessary, but we would not be what we are without it."

I was raised a Roman Catholic, and though I don’t go to Mass regularly anymore, I still remember early mornings

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during Advent when I went to liturgies at my parochial school. It was part of my offering—the sacrifice I made to honor the impending birth of the Savior—along with giving up candy at Lent. So few people attended at that hour that the priest turned on only a few lights near the altar. Approaching the front of the church, my plastic book bag rustling against my winter coat, I felt as if I were nearing the seashore at sunrise: the silhouettes of old widows on their kneelers at low tide, waiting for the priest to come in, starting the ritual in plain, unsung vernacular. No organist to blast us into reverence. No procession.

Every day, all over the world, these sparsely attended ceremonies still happen. Masses are said. Poetry is read. Poems are written on screens and scraps of paper. When I retire for the day, I move into a meditative, solitary, poetic space. These are the central filaments burning through my life, and the longer I live, the more they seem to be fused together.

Poetry is marginal, thankless, untethered from fame and fortune; it's also gut level, urgent, private yet yearning for connection. In all these ways, it's like prayer for me. I'm a not-quite-lapsed Catholic with Zen leanings, but I'll always pray—and I'll always write poems. Writing hasn't brought me the Poetry Jackpot I once pursued, but it draws on the same inner wiring that flickers when I pray.

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In the 2012 collection *A God in the House: Poets Talk About Faith*, nineteen contemporary American poets, from Buddhist to Wiccan to Christian, discuss how their artistic and spiritual lives inform one another. Kazim Ali, who was raised a Shia Muslim, observes in his essay "Doubt and Seeking":

> [Prayer is] speaking to someone you know is not going to be able to speak back, so you're allowed to be the most honest that you can be. In prayer you're allowed to be as purely selfish as you like. You can ask for something completely irrational. I have written that prayer is a form of panic, because in prayer you don't really think you're going to be answered. You'll either get what you want or you won't.

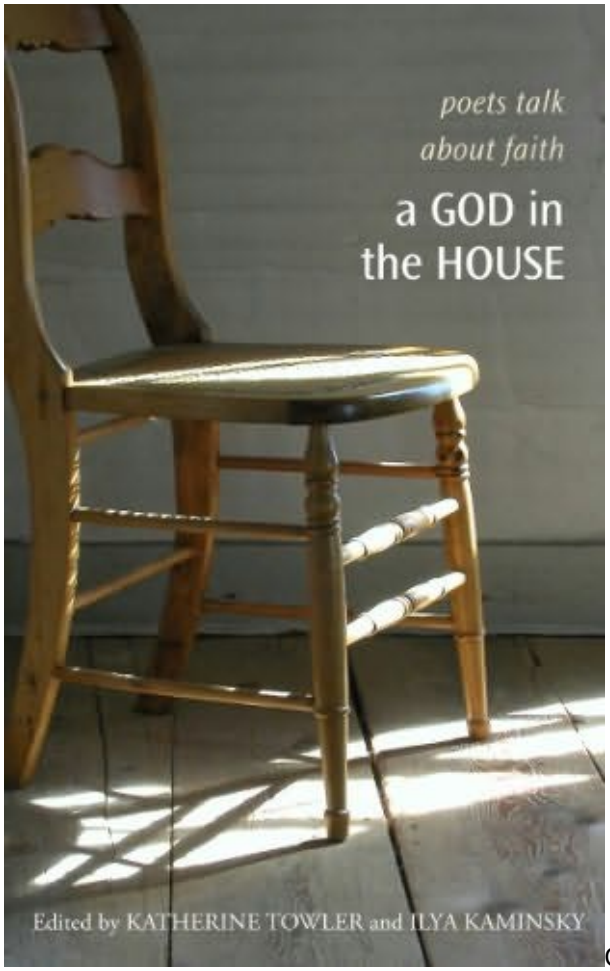
You could replace the word "prayer" with "poetry" with little or no loss of meaning. I'd even go so far as to say that submitting my work to a journal often feels like this, too. Sometimes, when I get an answer in the form of an acceptance, I'm stunned.

"I never think of a possible God reading my poems, although the gods used to love the arts," writes Fanny Howe in her essay "Footsteps over Ground." She adds:

> Poetry could be spoken into a well, of course, and drop like a penny into the black water. Sometimes I think that there is a heaven for poems and novels and music and dance and paintings, but they might only be hard-worked sparks off a great mill, which may add up to a whole-cloth in the infinite.

And here, you could easily replace the word "poetry" with "prayer." The penny falling to the bottom of a well is more often what we experience. But both poetry and prayer are things humans have learned to do in order to go on. Doubt is a given, but we do get to choose what it is we doubt.

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Quite a few authors in *A God in the House* (Howe, Gerald Stern, Jane Hirschfield, Christian Wiman) invoke the spiritual writing of Simone Weil, including her assertion that "absolutely unmixed attention is prayer." This sounds like the Zen concept of mindfulness. And it broadens the possibility for poetry as prayer, regardless of content, since writing poetry is an act of acute mindfulness. We mostly use words in the practical world to persuade or communicate, but prayers in various religious traditions can be lamentations of great sorrow. *Help me, save me, take this pain away—I am in agony.* In a church or a temple or a mosque, such prayerful lamentation is viewed as a form of expression for its own good, even when it doesn't lead immediately to a change of emotional state.

Perhaps the unmixed attention Weil wrote of is a unity of intention and utterance that's far too rare in our own lives. We seldom match what we think or feel with what we actually say. When it happens spontaneously in poetry or prayer—Allen Ginsberg's "First thought, best thought" ideal —it feels like a miracle, as do all the moments when I manage to get out of my own way as a poet.

Many people who pray don't envision a clear image of whom or what they're praying to. But poets often have some sense of their potential readers. There are authorities whose approval I've tried to win or simply people I've tried to please: teachers, fellow writers, editors, contest judges—even my uncle, who actually reads my poems when they appear in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, where he used to work.

And yet, my most immersed writing is not done with those real faces in mind. I write to the same general entity to which I pray. It's as if the dome of my skull extends to the ceiling of the room I'm in, then to the dome of the sky and outward. It's like the musings I had as a child lying awake at night, when my imagination took me to the farthest reaches of the galaxy. But then I emerge from this wide-open state and begin thinking about possible readers—and the faces appear.

This might also be where the magic ends.

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I write poetry because it's what I do, just as frogs croak and mathematicians ponder numbers. Poetry draws on something in me that has persisted over time, even as I've distracted myself with other goals, demands, and purposes; even as I've been forced by circumstance to strip writing poetry of certain expectations.



At 21, I was sure I'd publish my first book before I was 25. I'm past my forties now and have yet to find a publisher for a book-length collection, though I've published more than a hundred individual poems and two chapbooks. So, if a "real" book is the equivalent of receiving indisputable evidence that your prayers are being answered, I'm still waiting.

It hasn't been easy to shed the bitter urgency I've felt on learning that one of my manuscripts was a finalist in this or that contest, but was not the winner. Writing in order to attain external success can be as tainted and brittle as saying a prayer that, in truth, is more like a command: *(Please), God, let me get through this difficulty (or else)—*

Or else what? It's a false threat, if there's little else left to do but pray. When my partner is in the ICU, his lungs full of fluid backed up from a defective aortic valve; when my nephew is deployed to Afghanistan; when an ex is drowning in his addiction; when I hit a dead end in my job and don't think I can do it one more day—every effort to imagine that these things might be gotten through is a kind of prayer that helps me weather a life over which I have little control.

Repeated disappointment in my quest to hit the Poetry Jackpot has taught me to recast the jackpot in the lowercase—locating it not in the outcome but in the act of writing itself, sorting out the healthy from the unhealthy intentions for doing it. Of course, this shift in perspective was not as neat as the preceding sentence makes it seem. There were years of thrashing about, of turning over stones and even throwing them, then moments of exhaustion when I just barely heard the message from within:

This is too fragile and fraught to be something that guides your whole life.

I didn't hear those words, exactly—and this is important. For decades, I've made my living as a writer. But I can't manipulate or edit total gut realizations. I can throw words at them, but it would be like shaking a water bottle at a forest

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fire; at best, I can chase the feeling with metaphors: It's like this—no, like this—or like this.

So, odd as this sounds for a poet, I now seek wordlessness. When I meditate, I intercept hundreds of times the impulse to shape a perception into words. Reduced to basics, the challenge facing any writer is knowing what to say—and what not to.

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To read or listen to poetry requires unmixed attention just as writing it does. And when a poem is read aloud, there's a communal, at times ritualistic, element that can make a reading feel like collective prayer, even if there are only a few listeners in the audience or I'm listening by myself.

When I want to feel moved and enlarged, all I have to do is play Patti Smith's rendition of Ginsberg's "Footnote to Howl." His long list poem from 1955 gathers people, places, objects, and abstractions onto a single exuberant altar. It's certainly a prayer, one that opens this way:

Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!

The world is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy! The nose is holy! The tongue and cock and hand and asshole holy!

Everything is holy! everybody's holy! everywhere is holy! everyday is in eternity! Everyman's an angel!

Some parts of Ginsberg's list ("forgiveness! charity! faith! bodies! suffering! magnanimity!") belong in any conventional catalogue of what a prayer celebrates as sacred. Other profane elements ("the cocks of the grandfathers of Kansas!") gain admission because they are swept up into his ritualistic roll call.

I can easily parody Ginsberg's litany: *Holy the Dairy Queen, holy the barns of the Amish where cheese is releasing its ambitious stench, holy the Pittsburgh Pirates and the Internet*. But reading the poem aloud feels to me the way putting on ritual garments must to a shaman or rabbi or priest. Watching Patti Smith perform the poem (various versions are available on YouTube), I get shivers seeing how it transforms her, and it's clear why she titled her treatment of the poem "Spell."

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A parody can't do that. It can't manifest as the palpable unity of intention and utterance. It can't do what Emily Dickinson famously said that poetry did to her:

> If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only [ways] I know it. Is there any other way.

Like the process of prayer—to God, to a better and bigger self, to the atmosphere—writing can be a step toward unifying heart, mind, body, universe. Ginsberg's frenzied catalogue ends on "brilliant intelligent kindness of the soul"; Eliot's *The Waste Land* on "shantih," or "the peace that surpasseth understanding." Neither bang nor whimper, endings like these are at once humble and tenacious. They say "Amen" and step aside so that a greater wordlessness can work its magic.

Publishing Information



- "12 or 20 (Second Series) Questions with Geoffrey Nutter," [4] interview by Rob McClennan on his blog, August 8, 2013.
- *A God in the House: Poets Talk About Faith,* [5]edited by Ilya Kaminsky and Katherine Towler (Tupelo Press, 2012).
- "Footnote to Howl" [6] by Allen Ginsberg, originally written in 1955 and published in *Collected Poems 1947–1957* by Allen Ginsberg (HarperCollins, 2006).
- "Spell," [7] Patti Smith's rendition of "Footnote to Howl." Links to many versions appear on *The Allen Ginsberg Project* blog, including the one here with Philip Glass in honor of a visit from the Dalai Lama and her performance at Ginsberg's 1998 memorial at St. John the Divine in New York City. It also appears on her CD *Peace and Noise (*Arista, 1997).
- "*That* is poetry": [8] Emily Dickinson quote from Thomas Higginson's notes on a visit he made to her family home in 1870. See one version in "Letters from Dickinson to Higginson" (L342a), *Dickinson Electronic Archives,* the DEA Collective.

Art Information

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- "Life on a Lily Pad [10]" © Michelle Tribe; Creative Commons license.
- "Allen Ginsberg, Miami Bookfair International, 1985 [11]" © MDCArchives; Creative Commons license.
- "Patti Smith Performing at TIM Festival, Marina da Glória, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil [12]" (2006) © Daigo Oliva; Creative Commons license.
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Ellen McGrath Smith teaches at the University of Pittsburgh. Her poems have appeared in *Cimarron, Bayou, Quiddity, Sententia,* and the *American Poetry Review,* among other journals. Her work has been recognized with an AROHO Orlando Prize, an Academy of American Poets award, a Rainmaker Award from *Zone 3* magazine, and a 2007 Individual Artist grant from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts.

A chapbook of her poems, *Scatter, Feed,* will be published in 2014 by Seven Kitchens Press.

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