

Why I write (and share) poetry

*In which I try to explain to you
that part of myself that constantly wants
to explain myself to you*

Here I sit, sacred keyboard brandished, to address this ritual of wondering why I feel compelled to write poetry.

That's not a daunting question. Its answer seems ready, and probably holds most of its truth in the beauty and liberation I so often find in words. They feel, at times, like my second lifeblood because of the way they flow back and forth through me, sustaining me, indispensable but beyond my direct control. That perfect turn of phrase, that holy ideal metaphor, always hovering just out of reach...when I strain for these and manage to seize them, they open for me with a sense of rightness that can settle like a balm onto any mental wound.

Also this: I have a belief that nothing of what I think or do will last much beyond the thinking or doing. So, writing feels like making a mark on the world that says, "I was here, and I felt this way." I suppose poetry is one way I've found meaning, and a way I've tried hard to preserve it.

Plus, this strange belief I uphold: to strive to understand something is one very noble way of loving it. I want to love the world, so I strive to analyze and comprehend it. And what better place to start than with my own mind? That which is most puzzling or vexing deserves the most analysis. Actions I took or thoughts I had that surprised or disappointed me are naturally to be analyzed and understood, as a way to love myself—especially if that process helps me improve. Improvement is another balm.

It turns out that when difficult things happen, inside or outside of my skull, my first instinct is to understand them. That's what can best tame them. But when that's impossible, it can often suffice to simply describe them. It's my way of smothering something ugly with beauty, as a way of disarming it.

But even if none of the above were true, I think I would still write. Words are another lifeblood. Oh, how I love to cover the world with words.

So I find that I mostly know why I write. The next question is the harder one: why do I—actually quite a private person—feel compelled to *share* what I've written with people who matter to me?

Perhaps the explanation has to do with the danger I perceive in visibility. I feel that my mind is a bit out of step with yours. It kind of just does its own thing. As a result of this awareness, for all of my life I have been dogged by an unshakeable sense that I am bound to be misjudged and misunderstood, and I don't think I've been proven entirely wrong in that perception. I started out as a fiercely self-critical perfectionist, and though I was eventually able to reason myself out of destructive levels of that behavior and love myself almost as much as I deserve, I was somehow never quite as successful as convincing the wounded boy inside that other people don't need him to be perfect either. I still worry far too much about how I am perceived.

I came to believe quite a long time ago that my particular way of understanding the world is out of phase with that of most other people around me. Concerns that are paramount to me

don't seem to press on others in quite the same way. (For instance, my hardheaded insistence that people and things operate according what I feel is *reasonable* has probably been one of the chief trials of my poor wife's life.)

This feeling that I'm *out of step* led to a tendency to hide my true self from others, putting on masks to make myself more presentable as the person I believed they wanted to see. Or, if that was either impossible or just too taxing, I learned to just remain silent when my opinions were ones that might not slot into lockstep with the accepted view. This is a tendency I picked up in childhood, then honed during adolescence. Even in my best and closest relationships I have taken opportunities to practice it.

But I have also long believed in the ability of *being known* to smooth over the awkwardness in my relationships. Indeed, I find that one of my dearest desires is to be truly known. It's a yearning reason can't even approach—I would want it even if convinced it would diminish my happiness. It's the thing I often fantasize about when I drift into idle daydreaming. The idea of being fully understood, yet still approved of, is the kind of fondest wish that pulses in my secret core, down in the place where others might yearn to be loved, or powerful, or forgiven. Universal antidote, glowing golden in an ornate vial. Reaching in to touch this possibility, to contemplate it, I find my eyes tearing over and I know it's something I crave from the foundations of my soul.

However, it's impossible to achieve because I am polite. I'm too aware of the sharp edges on all my opinions—the places where they will inconvenience or injure those who explore them. The thought of complete, open honesty feels like the thought of choosing to leave my clothing at home the next time I show up to a family party or take a walk through the neighborhood. There are reasons we hide parts of ourselves, and half of those reasons are more about the comfort of others than our own.

As a person who thinks deeply and has the tendency to want to discuss and analyze all the most important ideas with the important people, it can be painful and unnatural sometimes to love someone and yet hold my relationship with them at a superficial level. It can feel cheapening. Why practice small talk when there's big talk as an option? If I had no filter, you'd probably hate being around me because of constant attempts to engage you in philosophizing, enlist you in my quests, and lovingly invite you to confront (with my earnest help!) the irrationality behind your actions.

When a family member suffers a tragedy for which there is no remedy, most people seem to want to retreat into prayer, denial, prayerful denial, or all of the above. But my inclination—not much of a palliative—might be to seize whoever is nearest and launch into a discussion on the intractability of the problem of evil. That's because for me, the quest to uncover the truth at the bottom of everything is the first and last coping tactic.

Luckily, I do have a filter; I mentioned it above, and it's overactive if anything. It can get stifling, but I can't ever drop it because it keeps me safe (in two different senses). But the filter gets in the way of the aim of being known, of existing in complete honesty. So, I have struggled in recent years with what to do about the quandary of wanting my loved ones to know me, yet being convinced that knowing me might cause them to dislike me or actually introduce distance between us. What I came up with, a few years ago, was the tiny step of simply sharing the poetry I was already writing.

I've always written poems, and it's very often been a cathartic practice in which a question or struggle is given a description and confronted through naming. It really feels like I pour my soul into poems. Sometimes, actually, it feels like my soul is demanding I create an outlet for it to pour itself into, whether I'm ready or not. A feeling or question that has been sloshing around suddenly congeals around a single phrase, which I quickly write down, then set about building upon it in a process that seems more oyster than Michelangelo. Supposedly he claimed he simply saw the sculpture and then chiseled away everything around it, but to me the end result is usually unknown until I suddenly stumbling into that clearing and know I have arrived.

It's like pulling out bits of myself and gluing them onto the scaffold in the most attractive way, over and over. Rearrange, rework, reconfigure. Then, stand it up and smile at it as it glistens. If there was pain behind me, its press is a bit lessened. If there was love, it settles more securely into its throne. But sharing the bits of hardened soul with others can feel like throwing back the curtain on secret parts of myself that I actually wish would be seen. That, too, is a small catharsis—thought it's something I have to force myself to do through a herculean effort of will. Sharing myself like this is a gloopy fiber supplement for my mental health, which I take for my own good.

It also affords the safety of feeling like a gift left on a doorstep. Because I've rung the doorbell and vacated the scene, I'm not there to witness how the gift is treated. If it's instantly discarded, I'll never know (though I'll have my haunting suspicions). And better still: if the receiver feels threatened or disgusted by my gift, the fact that I'm not there to witness their reaction means they can approach it honestly, as befits their own inclinations and capabilities, with no need to posture for the sake of my feelings.

A poem can be a thing of beauty, which means it can also be a thing of ugliness made beautiful. That makes poetry a way to carve off and transform some of our pain, shame, sorrow or anger into something better than all those things, which is one reason I love it. It alone can assuage for me my frustration at the impossibility of believing just how beautiful life can sometimes be. Also, the language of poetry accepts a certain practice of abstraction or obfuscation that can make it easier to convey my feelings—or even some of my thoughts—about a subject, without needing too much of a support structure of explanation. It can be my way of saying, “There is an unsolvable problem that bothers me,” or “There is an overabundance of joy beyond my ability to process,” without having to necessarily even describe the subject or my feelings about it in a lot of specific and tedious detail.

And that is another reason why it is a way to reach out to others while remaining in a place of safety: an intercom on the wall of the bunker connected to a loudspeaker outside—the kind sometimes known to dress its emissions in a bit of wry crackle and fuzz. It's an emissary to the outside with a briefcase full of notepapers, cloaked if needed in a smart bit of ambiguity and ready to vanish at the first sign of interrogation. And I have to admit that even when I write a poem that operates in the second person, admonishing or asking or explaining to someone I love, I'm usually still writing about myself.

So, take my slippery gift of my completely heartfelt self-representation however you feel equipped to take it. I won't be there to warp its reception. There won't be a hand outstretched, waiting for you to shake it. There won't be a final exam or a request for a star-rating. It is, however, a declaration to everyone that you're always welcome on my wavelength, for whatever

amount of time fits your inclination and comfort. It's not because of negative opinions of you, or of your opinions, that I still my captive tongue.

They are simply a few of the words that felt so important, I couldn't rest until they were given form. First they burned inside me, then they glowed cooling on the page, and doing this is part of my recipe for sanity. So, go ahead and read what I've written if you have any interest in that part of me. But I know that words don't have that same heft for everyone, so it's also cool if you're totally uninterested and would rather watch football. Thank you, from deep within me, for having read this far. If you love me, thank you deeply for that, too.