

Why Poetry? (from the introduction to *The Poetry Reader's Toolkit* by Marc Polonsky)

Seriously—why poetry? It's a fair question.

Supposing I told you that poetry is important, not just to a few highbrow writers and readers, but important to you, to everyone, to the whole human race. Would you think I was exaggerating?

Because that *is* what I think. I think poetry is just about as essential as air. I believe that much of the violence and psychological illness and unease in our society is probably due to poetry deprivation.

In fact, bigotry and prejudice, being expressions of narrow-minded, unimaginative thinking, may not be curable by reason, but may wither away (I believe) from repeated exposure to poetry. Why? Simple. Poetry expands the mind; prejudice and bigotry contract it. Once a mind gets a taste of expansion, it resists contraction; it doesn't like to think in ways that cruelly limit and circumscribe its possibilities.

Poetry is the language that stretches the mind. Just as yoga and stretching exercises make the body more flexible, poetry limbers up the imagination, which is at least as important, maybe even more so, than limbering up the body.

But what is poetry?

In one sense, everyone knows the answer to this question. I once watched a football game on television with my father and we saw Terry Bradshaw complete four quick passes, driving his team sixty yards for the touchdown. "That was poetry," my dad said.

What he meant was that Bradshaw's passing attack was graceful, unpredictable, and aesthetically satisfying. He didn't mean that it was literally poetry; he meant that this football game had taken on qualities that one normally associates with the poetry that is made of words. He was using the term "poetry" metaphorically. He was making a comparison.

But my dad was not a poetry reader. He simply had an idea of what poetry is, or what poetry should be, as most of us do.

Here are a couple of dictionary definitions:

"an arrangement of words, especially a rhythmical composition, sometimes rhymed, in a style more imaginative than ordinary speech"

"a composition, in verse, especially one characterized by a highly developed form and the use of heightened language and rhythm to express an imaginative interpretation of the subject"

Another common, informal definition which I've heard from time to time is this: "Prose is words in the best order. Poetry is the best words in the best order." Here's what I would add: Poetry is words, chosen and arranged in such a way as to inspire the imagination.

But, you say, your imagination is inspired enough. Your senses are open. You love life. You interact with people and with nature. Isn't that more important than puzzling out peculiar words on a page?

Of course it is, but why make the comparison? The purpose of poetry is not to fill a void or to compensate for something else that may be missing. Poetry cannot replace walking in the forest, or falling in love, or having stimulating conversations. It's not supposed to.

Nor is poetry there to "improve you as a person," or increase your chances for "success" in the world, or even make you more literate. It's just that there is nothing else in the world quite like reading a poem. It is an activity as unique and inimitable as listening to music.

Poetry, like music, contains *rhythms* which may affect your mood and your spirit. In fact, if you listen to music, chances are you've already had some experience of poetry. Most songs contain words, and these words cast little spells as they sing in your mind. Poetry does the same thing. Both poetry and music must *engage your imagination*. Another way of looking at it is to say that you must *lend your imagination* to music, or to poetry, in order to derive enjoyment and satisfaction.

In this text, I will occasionally quote poetry that comes from music I like. My favorite music, being generally obscure and/or out of date, is probably different from yours. But no doubt there is poetry, compelling words which are especially meaningful or pleasing to you, in whatever music it is that you enjoy. (If the music you like best contains no words, I would still say that it has a "poetic" effect on you if it moves you.)

Just as there is an infinite variety of musical forms, so too does the term *poetry* encompass an infinity of expressions and styles. If you have read a hundred poems in your life and you think you know what poetry is, this is like having heard just a hundred songs and believing you know what music is. In a sense you do, but only in a very limited sense. You have only a *base*, not a real *body* of knowledge.

Learning to enjoy poetry is as natural as learning to swim. Even children can do it, though it takes practice, and the ability can be refined over time. Have you ever noticed how children experiment and play with words for fun, much as they play with, and within, water?

Some people think they don't understand poetry. This is because poetry has been needlessly mystified in our culture, to the point where many people imagine that only extraordinarily educated persons with exquisitely developed perceptual powers can truly "interpret" it. They imagine that poetry is written by and for an elite group of lofty

literary wizards.

Or people think a poem is like a piece of code to be deciphered. And if they fail to "get" it, it's because they lack the cleverness required to puzzle out the secret message.

Well. A poem is not a puzzle or a secret code. A poem is not an obscure hieroglyph to be "interpreted." A poem, if it works, will speak to you. If it does not speak to you, then it simply does not work—for you. And that's not your problem. It's a matter of chemistry. You won't relate to every song you hear either, nor will you fall in love with every person you meet.

It takes time, though, to get to know a poem. You do have to give a poem, and yourself, a chance. A poem generally requires more than one exposure—just like a song or a person does. Reading a poem is not like reading the newspaper. Here's where many people get mixed up. They think: words on a page, read 'em, that's it.

No. A poem requires patience. That is why the first and most essential tool in our toolkit is patience.

A poem shouldn't be cryptic or obscure. But it may require a third or fourth or sixth or seventh reading before it can unfold, full bloom, in your mind—at which point you might be happily surprised. The repeated readings should never feel like a chore, however. In a sense, that's actually the only "trick": cultivating the ease and patience—the suspension of urgency and anxiety—necessary to really feel and enjoy a poem.

You must suspend or, if possible, banish your impatience about getting on with the next thing you have to do. You cannot be in a hurry and read poetry at the same time. Honestly. That's like trying to sing opera while doing jumping jacks. It's like trying to hear your own heartbeat over the roar of a jet engine.