



# Expressing the inexpressible

Spiritually themed poetry grapples with paradoxes, mysteries and moments of truth

*It is difficult  
to get the news from poems  
yet men die miserably every day  
for lack  
of what is found there.*

**W**illiam Carlos Williams penned these lines back in the 1950s, but they seem even more pertinent to the world of 2011, don't they? Sadly, many of us suspect that a disillusionment is taking root, a kind of despair that can't be ignored or explained away. But the ones who come closest to succeeding in doing something about it are the poets. In other words, *us*.

Why? Because we poets know it's sometimes our job to try to express in words what everybody claims can't be expressed in words. Sounds impossible, but it's been done time and again by poets who have found a way, often through the senses, to create works that are more than the sum of their parts. To name a few of these poets: Rainer Maria Rilke, William Blake, Lao Tzu (the founder of Taoism), the Sufi mystic Rumi, and Zen master Basho, among many others.

More and more contemporary poets are writing such poems as well, but it would be impossible to compile a reasonably representative list. The problem, of course, is that so many of our finest poets include a spiritual element in nearly all of their work, but they really can't be pigeonholed as "spiritual poets."

## Secret knowledge

It might be easy to assume that these poets are successful because of some kind of mysterious connection they have to the secrets of the universe—whether it's an unshakable faith in the Judeo-



Christian God, or in something less familiar to many of us, like New Age thought, some form of mysticism, one of the venerable Eastern religions like Buddhism, Hinduism or Islam, or a philosophy such as Taoism. We could conclude that complete devotion and/or firm convictions are what's needed in order to channel profound thoughts, and translate them into memorable language for the reader.

Is this indeed the secret? Is a personal pipeline to one of the great ideologies a requirement for creating spiritual poetry? My own highly subjective answer is *yes and no*.

Yes, because it's hard to deny that a significant level of involvement with an ideology of some kind—an opinion on where we stand in the greater scheme of things, even if it's based on doubt—is probably essential before a poet can write insightfully on the subject.

And *no*, because getting to this level of insight really isn't particularly mysterious. It can be achieved, in fact, by virtually any thoughtful poet who has ever experienced a sense of wonder, doubt, disillusion, joy or awe (and haven't we all?). If the experience was important enough, it's likely that the poet will start talking to himself or herself about it—asking, OK, what was *that* all about?

—and put an honest answer down on the page.

## Fresh insights

This can't be successfully faked, incidentally. A poem about spirituality won't survive if it's only a list of stale pronouncements, or a clump of predictable "revelations" that both poet and reader knew all along. ("Thou shalt not steal"? Well, duh.) Some of these pseudo-insights might come across as philosophy at first glance, but too often they evaporate immediately into thin air. They are either too simplistic ("The older I get, the faster time flies"), too painfully obvious ("I will never be a soaring bird"), or too sanctimonious ("Stop the world and smell the roses!").

There is nothing really wrong with deciding to write poems about small moments of truth like these; it's only that there are many less predictable ways of confronting them. In the "time flies" department, for example, countless memorable approaches are waiting for you in the wings. For example, David Scheler's "Unweaving Time":

Watch it unspool  
like thread  
from a skein.

The instant  
you look back,  
you are the image  
you were  
a second before.

Considerably more profound than what might come through on a first reading, this poem of just 22 words has quite a bit to say about human vulnerability, self-awareness and mortality.



On a similar theme is this deceptively simple, highly accomplished haiku by CX Dillhunt:

Already there are  
red leaves on the ground—I want  
to put them back up

And another example, this one written more than 650 years ago by Japanese poet Kozan Ichikyo:

Empty-handed I entered the world  
Barefoot I leave it.  
My coming, my going—  
Two simple happenings  
That got entangled.

What can poets like us take away from such brief but memorable meditations on vast subjects? Robert Siegel, a distinguished poet known for his works that celebrate life in all its aspects, suggests we keep in mind that good poems nearly always fall into one of three categories: 1) poems that reveal, often memorably, a new take on something we've always known; 2) poems that present brand-new insights, but with more grace and musicality than prose

## WORKOUT

**HERE ARE** five ways to begin a poem that addresses spirituality:

1. Write the poem as a first-person meditation.
2. Compose it as if it were a narrative, or a story, involving the speaker and a higher power.
3. Frame it as a question, or a series of questions.
4. Shape it as a back-and-forth conversation with a higher power.
5. Compose it straightforwardly, as a direct philosophical statement of belief, doubt or even disbelief.

—M.L.T.

could provide; or 3) that rare breed of “inevitable” poems that simply can’t be worded any other way, and that manage to express something that’s impossible to express.

That last one sounds like a paradox, doesn’t it? And yet all three of the poems quoted earlier in this column fall easily into that category. Why? Because each of them says something new, something we’d never really known before—meaning they’d flunk the basic requirements for category No. 1. Second, there is no way that any of them can be paraphrased into prose without letting their true meaning slip away—so they don’t fall into category No. 2, either. Instead, thanks to metaphor, insinuation and allusion, all three manage somehow to express the inexpressible. Much like spirituality itself, each of them is more than the sum of its parts.

### A caution about birds

How about spirituality and poems about birds? You’ve read flocks and flocks of them, haven’t you? And while there’s certainly no law against using doves and robins and meadowlarks as metaphors in your work, a bird poem that’s attempting to knock on heaven’s door has to go well beyond the freedom-to-soar conceit. As CX Dillhunt memorably puts it:

Egret posing for  
my haiku takes off—must have  
other business.

On the other hand, there are some magnificent exceptions to my beware-of-the-bird-poem warning. Think of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ “The Windhover,” Emily Dickinson’s “These are the days when the birds come back” and Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “To a Skylark,” to name just a few splendid bird poems that could change your life forever. “Sanctus,” by Barbara Crooker, is a fine contemporary example, which clearly leaves earthbound constraints behind:

A goldfinch, bright as a grace note,  
has landed  
on a branch across the creek that mutters  
and murmurs to itself as it rushes on,  
always  
in a hurry. The *ee oh lay* of a wood  
thrush echoes  
from deep in the forest, someplace  
green. In paintings,  
the Holy Ghost usually takes the form  
of a stylized  
dove, its whiteness a blaze of purity.  
But what if  
it’s really a mourning dove, ordinary as  
daylight  
in its old coat, nothing you’d ever notice.  
When he rises from the creek and the  
light flares  
behind, his tail is edged in white scallops,  
shining. And when he opens his beak,  
isn’t he calling your name,  
sweet and low, *you, you, you?*

So it clearly can be done, even in the company of birds. Even so, please keep in mind that spiritual poetry often won’t tolerate any conscious effort on the part of the poet to sound devout or virtuous or “ascending into the light.” Understatement is key. Don’t write about spiritual matters by inventing, say, a bizarre satanic figure or by dashing off a little knee-jerk prayer.

Remember, if you simply write as fine a poem as you can, your spiritual subject matter will manifest itself. Your poem will reveal that you’ve taken time to look inward, that you’ve pondered the matter, and that you’ve come up with a solid and thoughtful basis for what you have to say. To quote Robert Siegel:

An oar dips.  
The moon wobbles,  
Sails on.

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