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TALKING TO STRANGERS

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(Thanks to Tiel, Dorothy, & all the OSPA volunteers. I'm honored to be invited.)

In 1860, the great Walt Whitman wrote the following lines:

Stranger, if you passing meet me and desire to speak to me,
Why should you not speak to me?
And why should I not speak to you?

When I was young, growing up in postwar Britain, we used to take our summer holidays driving. At first we always went to Scotland as my father was an avid fly fisherman, but as his business grew during the fifties, my mother and I talked him into holidaying further afield in Switzerland or Austria or later Spain. All of these required crossing the English Channel by car ferry and driving to our destination through France. France was never our final destination as my parents were of a generation that still had a deeply ingrained suspicion of the French—a holdover from centuries of wars, despite having been on the same side in the most recent war.

My father was not liberal enough to believe in speaking to other people, neither the French, nor others who like us were going in search of mountains or beaches, but he did believe in acknowledging other British cars which were easily spotted by their makes – they were not Citroens or Peugeot's or Fiats, but they were Morris Minors, Jaguars, or Vauxhalls. As one of our kind would approach on a narrow French road (they were all narrow back then), he would gently toot the horn as we all raised our hands in greeting (a bit like the Queen). This delicate connection with our

compatriots was not entirely what Walt Whitman meant by speaking with strangers—after all these were English, or at least Welsh or Scottish, and like us they were long-distance motorists, of whom there were still relatively few in the fifties.

The wonderful poet, Naomi Shihab Nye, whose work you probably know (if you don't, find it!), thought about this subject when taking a long car trip with her husband and young son. She wrote about it in an essay called "Newcomers in a Troubled Land" and she was a lot more relaxed about it than my father had been.

On one of those Idaho back roads, I contemplated deeply the sweet emblem of a stranger's hand raised in passing, a car or truck traveling the other way whose driver wanted somehow to say, "Good journey, I've been where you're going, travel well." I wanted to tell my friends back home who were teaching their children not to talk to strangers that they had it all wrong. *Do* talk to strangers. Raise your hand to them in strange places, on back roads where leaning fields of tasseled grass have more identity than you do. Ask strangers anything you want. Maybe they'll have an answer. Don't go home with them, don't take off your pants with them, but talk, talk, talk.... I remember thinking, that night, that talking to strangers has been the most important thing I do in my life. It seemed doubtful two wagons on the Oregon Trail would have overtaken one another without a word or message being exchanged.

How much have we lost in this cornucopia land?

So Naomi's piece returns to the notion of "strangers." Strangers who are more strange than the motorists in France had been. Strangers in the sense of "not like us." What does this have to say to poets? Are we writing for strangers or just for an audience of people like ourselves?

I know when I started to write poems, someone advised me to imagine a supportive reader who would easily understand what I was getting at—or perhaps a whole room full of like-minded people—and for a while that advice was helpful in dispelling my nervousness at letting my true self show—it avoided the danger of feeling too different from my reader while I was writing. It was especially useful when I first wrote about being a lesbian. I could conjure up a huge roomful of whooping and hollering lesbians, and conveniently forget that I might be speaking, as well, to some fundamentalist homophobes.

This false comfort flew out the window when my first book was published – *Trying to be an Honest Woman*. Somehow at first I didn't worry too much about the strangers, or about being more "public" than I'd ever been before, at least not until we had dinner with a friend who had just returned from Washington DC. "You'll be pleased to hear," she said over dinner. "I walked into a bookstore there in DC, and your book was displayed on the counter."

Ruth told me later that when our friend said that, I turned pale, even white. For the first time ever, I could picture total strangers picking up my book and reading my words. For the first time, I wouldn't be there to explain, or to leave out a line I wasn't sure would go down well. I wouldn't be there to cue the reader when to laugh or when to cry, when to go in deep or when to listen to the surface.

We are living in a time, now, when it seems more important than ever to connect with people beyond the boundaries of our own little subsets of the human race. Not just people of our own age, or gender, or race. Nor only people who habitually read poems. In other words, we need to do what poets have been talking about for decades – we need to reach out to strangers.

Part of the problem is that we want our poems to speak to people who are not accustomed to reading poetry. We worry about their discomfort. But if we get it right – if we find the heart of our subject, at least some of them surely will respond. One of the nicer pieces of feedback for a poet, and for me, is the one that starts, "I don't really read poetry BUT..."

Of course there are some who won't, at first, make the stretch, slow themselves down to linger with a poem, or get over their fear of white space down the sides of a page. I'll indulge here in another personal anecdote, just to give you a glimpse of the more hopeless kind of readers. In the eighties, I was invited to give a reading at the Brighton, England, Arts Festival – a big event with theatre and dance, music, art and poetry, held annually in my hometown. I was excited to read there where I grew up and went to school, but I was also a bit nervous as I still had family

members in the area – family members who didn't read poetry! However, they showed willing, and offered to have a party at my brother's house after the reading. They also felt obliged to come along to the Old Ship Hotel on the Brighton seafront, where I read with another poet. At the end of the reading, my brother approached me where I was standing with the Festival director, who didn't know it was my brother or that he was a complete philistine. "How did you enjoy Judith's reading," asked the festival guy. "Well," said my brother, "I liked the poems I was IN, but I can't understand why anyone would read the ones they aren't in."

This, of course, feeds right into one of the fears and challenges we poets face. We don't want to write only for the people who populate the poems. As Mandelstam said, "It's boring to be whispering to a neighbor." But if we write poems that begin with personal experience, how can we trust that they will speak to readers who are *not* connected to that experience, or at least to the geographical or social setting? In other words, how can we aim for that elusive relevance that is often called "universal."

The idea that a poem should be "universal" is scary. Adrienne Rich had something to say about this in her essay, "Someone is Writing a Poem:"

Someone writing a poem believes in a reader, in readers, of that poem. The "who" of that reader quivers like a jellyfish. Self-reference is always possible: that my "I" is a universal "we," that the reader is my clone. That sending letters to myself is enough for attention to be paid. That my chip of mirror contains the world.

But most often someone writing a poem believes in, depends on, a delicate, vibrating range of difference, that "I" can become a "we" without extinguishing others, that a partly common language exists to which strangers can bring their own heartbeat, memories, images. A language that itself has learned from the heartbeat, memories, images of strangers.

I want to draw your attention to that last sentence: "A language that itself has learned from the heartbeat, memories, images of strangers." All our writing needs to draw on a world beyond the borders of our own lives and our own memories. Some of what we have absorbed over the years has come from stories told by friends or neighbors, our own travels into new cultures, or accounts of events witnessed by travelers or

journalists. And it ought to be true that some of our internalized understanding of a wide world has also come from wide reading. In fact I dare to say: we ought to be reading strangers—not just authors we don't happen to know, but poets and writers from places and cultures that are “strange” in the sense of unfamiliar.

Women poets of a certain age grew accustomed to automatically throwing in the name of Audre Lorde when we mentioned the period of early Adrienne Rich and other feminist poets. Maybe we also mentioned Pat Parker or Gloria Anzaldua. Today, there are many more choices to demonstrate that we read beyond our own backgrounds: Tretheway, Smith, Terricotte, Rankine, Herrera, Espada, Lee, and Inada, to name just a few. So I would claim that a part of opening up our work in the direction of universality involves what we choose to read.

Nevertheless, when we think about our poems being “universal,” the thought can lead us into writing trouble. When thinking about universality, we may be tempted to cut out the most personal parts of the poem—parts we just cannot trust our reader to “get” or emotionally to relate to. Or we may want to cut parts that could reveal aspects of ourselves that might encounter hostility in the reader. Here is one of my own poems that offered me that particular temptation. It felt dangerous to publish a poem that not only revealed my lack of belief in god, but also my disgust at religion in general. It was very tempting to tone it down. But, as may sometimes happen, I was encouraged to speak out because of another writer who had taken that risk—in this instance the memoir writer, Paul Monette, who let rip with his rage at religion in the National Book Award winning memoir: *Becoming a Man*. This is one way in which we help one another. I try to remember that when I take a big risk, it may also encourage another writer to show herself more freely.

Not a Credo

1

One distant woman and a dog on a two mile beach.
Low, warm sun in a streaky sky.

Flock of sandpipers scurries in unison.
Gliding heron prowls above the bay.
In front of my bench, a brown dumpling of a bird
darts from boulders
making kissing sounds.
On the far side of the water, log trucks groan.
This side nearly all is quiet.

Blue is everywhere, including inside me.
They so diminish this
who call it god—or even god's best work.

2

What is this god
they second guess?
argue about?
fight in the name of?
What great longing lurks in the breasts of humans
that they must conjure a deity from forests
where stands of trees
are trunk and branch and leaf—
not cathedrals of sacred, heavy stone?

Why the rules, the threats?
the promises to lure the unsuspecting
with virgins or angels sitting on clouds in the sky—
a hundred distractions from the business of dying?

3

Few dare to reject the tricks
pulled off by the wizard in his cloak,
the priest in his gown, rabbi, imam, pious clown.
But where, amid all that pomp,
is the hiding place of conscience?

The backbone of one life glows and is soon snuffed out:
no fuss, no ascension, no bribery at the gate.
The light, the incredible light of every day
is followed not by darkness
nor even silence,
but, lo and behold, the greatest emptiness emptied.

[from The Conversation, Salmon Poetry c.2015]

Another mistake we can make in aiming for universality is to disguise the very fact that this is a personal poem, and start to use the universal “we” – or even worse “one” – instead of that pesky little word, “I” that holds so much in its one downward stroke. For a time, I grappled with this, perhaps because I grew up in Britain in an era where there always lurked the possibility of being seen as self obsessed. To use “I” was to tread in dangerous waters. *One* was more inclined to describe *one’s* experience in the safer waters of the impersonal *one*.

So, to avoid the “I”, we may try using the inclusive “we” meaning “we the people” or “we humans.” I’ve noticed that readers, particularly American readers, sometimes balk at being included in that kind of “we”. Here’s an example from my poem “The Book of the Ocean” where I hope I got away with using “we” to mean people or humans in general.

...a reminder of the deep dark
into which we dive nightly, a reminder
of the moon that hauls us and hurls us
on the brink of wrinkled lands where once
we staggered ashore, trying to become human.

Another way we sometimes avoid using I, when trying to widen the scope of a line or statement, is to use *you*. This is an alternative to the rather pompous “one.” Think of saying “you do this or that” when you really mean “one does this or that.” or “it’s customary to do this or that.” It’s a nonspecific *you*, but again watch out! Readers in my writing groups have balked at my using this *you* sometimes. “What me?!” they demand. No, I don’t do that!” Of course I didn’t mean *you* in that sense. What I really meant was “a person does that.”

Here’s a poem that uses “you.” The poem has three stanzas. In the first stanza the “you” is clearly a specific person —the speaker’s loved one. But then in the second and third stanzas, trying for a more universal statement that is not just about these two people – yet at the same time

remains about them in its details—the “you” widens to mean “one” or “people.”

Long Love

Is it your legs I remember or that photograph of your legs?
Long and skinny they were, swooping from
tiny denim shorts to huge hiking boots
with bright red laces. It’s a wonder those legs
could lift such boots, but they did, and with a grace
I cannot now attribute to love-struck eyes.

The thing is, when you grow old you fail to notice
your lover’s legs very often. Love-struck gives way
to love-soaked, a softer state in which legs are taken
for granted—except if they appear without pajamas
in the kitchen or require a close look for a splinter
or a suspicious mole traced softly with your forefinger.

Feeling the brown spot, you are struck by fear—
love having grown by now into a world,
the mole a potential hazard that could split your globe
down the middle and leave it to float in space
like a white dwarf, as the scientists call a dying star
eventually leaving nothing but another black hole.

[from *The Conversation*, Salmon Poetry c.2015]

One last comment on this pronoun question. Sometimes “you” really does mean “you”! “You, the reader.” It’s a simply direct address—As in the first stanza of my poem “The Seventies.”

*You’d think we’d have been nothing but happy—
indeed, we often speak of those days with nostalgia:
Oh how we shouted!—and marched and slept
in musty bags on the ground beside barbed wire,
beside the soldiers who guarded the war machines.
You’d think we’d recall striding, arms linked,
along the simmering streets, donning our costumes
of shocking certainty. You’d think those might be
the happiest days of all, when change flew in
from the west and further west and blind belief
raised its defiant fist inside the circle.*

Which brings us back to where I began. Who is that “you”—that reader or listener? Can I, in this poem, really be speaking to strangers? I am certainly making assumptions about them—I use the phrase “you’d think...” three times. But do I really know what my reader would think? I cannot know who she or he might be. Would she even have had to be alive in the seventies, or know anything about the feminist activists of this poem? And if she is *really* a stranger in the sense of *not at all like me*, can the poem work without her getting indignant? *Who do I think I am?* she might think, or even say aloud. Can my words bridge the space between our experiences, our lives, our generations our views of the world?

So—I address Walt Whitman:

We live some 150 years apart in time.

You were a gay man.

You were familiar with war.

You wrote at enormous length.

I share none of these characteristics. We are certainly not much alike yet why *should* I not try to speak to you?

I can say with complete confidence: *You certainly do speak to me.*