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Poetry and Consciousness

Diana Raab

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Poetry is more than words—it is a state in which internal and external worlds come together in awareness and give birth to something more true than what either can reach alone. The author offers two poems along with their context and reflections on the function of poetry.

Keywords: *poetry, poet, consciousness, awareness, interconnectedness, survival, creativity, illumination, Maslow's hierarchy of needs*

I'm wondering

what happened
to the old man at the window
whispering to the clerk at the
bustling Zimbabwe border beside
the sign warning of cholera and HIV

near the condoms in their torn box,
as he pushes his cane closer
to the window ledge begging
for entrance into the country
where his delirious wife of one-hundred years

lies in some clinic bed calling
his name, and all he has in his pocket
is one dollar, as the clerk leans closer
and with an impatient mean tone
yells that he needs nineteen more.

I thought about what the Dalai Lama
might have done right then and there,
and to emulate, I reach into my muddy
safari pocket and hand the old guy
the only twenty I had and wish him

a good day or however many more
he might be blessed with
before his God calls him to the gates
of his own private heaven which
one day he'll call home, hopefully
right alongside his wife.

(Raab, 2012, p. 41)

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Panoramic Ocean

We sit at this clothed table
where the land meets the sea

in a glass-enclosed room
nibbling on ocean fare

to the yelp of seals
weaving about the mouths

of hunter dolphins
and just before their very last gasp

I wonder who decided
on the perils of the food chain

and where it begins—
on the plate before me

or in the ocean's shimmer
blinding my green eyes.

(Raab, 2013, n.p.)

For me, the term consciousness as it pertains to poetry relates to a deep sense of knowing and awareness of the self and the environment—a cognitive state whereby the poet is fully aware of his or her internal and external worlds—where the interconnectedness between self and world is expressed in poetic form. In this way, during the process of crafting a poem, the poet's own consciousness is taken to the next level; the poet uplifts the reader's consciousness and, together, both reader and poet access a deeper sense of awareness. I believe that the most powerful poetry connects and resonates with the

reader because it offers a universal truth or altered state of consciousness.

This is one of the many reasons I love “people-watching,” especially when I’m observing different cultures. I wrote “I’m Wondering” in 2008 during a family trip to Africa at the time of a cholera outbreak. The authorities told us that we might not be able to visit Zimbabwe. At the border of Zimbabwe we entered a building where we had to show our identification and entry documents. We felt very much at the mercy of the bureaucrats who would decide whether we could enter.

I glanced around the small glass-enclosed holding area and realized that we were not nearly as vulnerable as a frail 80-year-old, hunchbacked man nearby. Desperately, he approached the window, his hand shaking with papers he had to present to the bureaucrat. His urgency woke my curiosity as I listened to their conversation. He told the bureaucrat that he had to return home to Zimbabwe to see his wife who was dying. My sense was that he had left for a short time, and his wife had fallen ill and the borders had closed. The experience increased my awareness of how desire drives us, and of the thin line between life and death, but more importantly, how in so many places around the world people are desperately struggling for survival. My African experience reminded me that no matter where we live, humans share basic needs. From my perspective, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs became even more poignant and relevant.

I wrote “Panoramic Ocean” several years later, under very different circumstances, while dining at an ocean-side restaurant with a friend. We had spent a day walking on the beach, talking, contemplating, and reflecting. My friend was encountering some personal problems. When we sat down at the barstools for dinner, I transcended into a dreamlike mystical state of mind while glancing at the expansive Pacific Ocean. Suddenly, so much in both of our lives came into focus. Some major stumbling blocks in my friend’s life turned into little bumps that she viewed as small, thanks to the ocean’s grandeur. The vision and illumination we each experienced expanded my consciousness and reminded me of our inherent smallness. In conclusion, regardless of where we live, whether we live in poverty or affluence, or are exposed to internal or external turmoil, humans share the same basic needs.

“I’m Wondering” and “Panoramic Ocean” both focus on survival, from personal and collective

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perspectives, which has been a major theme in my writing and has inspired my spiritual practice of mindfulness, which is inherent to creativity as it coincides with deep knowing and awareness. When exposed to an encounter, emotion, or image, writing calms and quiets the mind; the blank page becomes an invitation into a deeper state of consciousness. Through poetry, I am able to shed light on a lived experience with the hope that my words resonate with my readers in a way that is compelling and aids them in navigating and understanding their own journey.

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About the Author

Diana Raab, PhD, is a transpersonal psychologist, poet, memoirist, workshop leader, and award-winning author of eight books, including four poetry books, and over 500 articles and published poems. Her passion and expertise is writing for healing, transformation, and empowerment. She has been writing poetry since the age of 10 when she received from her mother her first journal to cope with her grandmother’s suicide. She is a regular blogger of *Psychology Today*, *PsychAlive*, *The Huffington Post* and *BrainSpeak*. Raab serves on a number of boards including, The Center for Autobiographical Studies and Poets & Writers. She is the trustee for the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) and Antioch University, Santa Barbara (AUSB). She lives in Southern California. For more information, visit www.dianaraab.com

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