

By Peggy Eastman, Poet-in-Residence



CREATING A POEM: A SPIRITUAL ADVENTURE

Where does a poem come from?

Many years ago, I met Mother Teresa of Calcutta, now a saint; she said, "Write something beautiful for God." So when I sit down to write a poem, I think of it as an opportunity to embark on a spiritual adventure with words.

When Father Ed asked me to be poet-in-residence at All Saints I considered it a great honor, a gift and a responsibility. I want my poems to help deepen readers' faith, to comfort them if the cares of the world are grinding them down, and to help them celebrate times of joy. In my poem "The Divine Within" I express my belief that each of us has a divine spark deep inside us.

Anything can begin the creative process for me: an idea in a sermon; a Scriptural passage; a remembered fragment of a dream; glimpsing a bushy-tailed red fox taking a drink at my birdbath; the face of a beggar on the street; the turning of autumn leaves; hearing a happy child's laugh; the pattern of bare branches in a wintry sky. All of creation is God's, so what I observe is reflective of His generosity and love. Nature has always been one of my most powerful influences. I love to sit outside and watch the leaves shivering in a breeze, see moving puffs of clouds in a deep blue sky and hear birdcalls. I crave a certain amount of silence for contemplation.

I have always been a bookworm from the time I could read, and have always cherished words. I like to write free verse with occasional internal rhymes, but not end rhymes; I also like to use a song-like refrain repetitively when it comes into my head and does not feel forced. A recent example from my poem "Days of Autumn Gold" is "Thank You, Lord, for days of autumn gold."

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Attention to detail guides me as I write; I like to create word pictures readers can see in their minds. In the Middle Ages many people were illiterate, and so detailed stained glass windows – like the exceptionally beautiful ones that grace All Saints – told stories in light. The windows lifted people’s minds out of their everyday existence and gave them a glimpse of the divine. I strive to do that in my poems. I write a first draft of my poems by hand, because I like the physical motion of writing with pen and paper. Then I rework them and type them on the computer. I do use a “Thesaurus” from my college days occasionally when I don’t feel I have quite the right word for what I want to say.

When I write poems about Biblical men and women I try to picture myself in their shoes. What did it feel like to pack up and leave everything familiar, as Abraham and Sarah did? I let that feeling guide me when I wrote “Man of Many Stars” and “Sarai’s Portion.” What was it like to be a prophet bringing the people of Israel messages they didn’t want to hear, as Jeremiah did? I explore that feeling in “Voice of the Prophet.” How did Mary feel when the angel Gabriel visited her before her marriage to Joseph and gave her the momentous news that she would bear the Savior of the world? What was it like to lie in a stable as an exhausted new mother cradling her newborn while shepherds and men from the far East in costly garb came to call? I explored that feeling in “Mary’s Starry Night.”

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The Christian calendar is a treasure trove of special events, days and times. In years past it helped our ancestors plan their time, as it does for us today. I really enjoy writing seasonal poems for the important religious events that mark the Christian year: All Saints Day, Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension and Pentecost. When we walk in solemn procession around Chevy Chase Circle on Good Friday with parishioners from other churches using my Stations of the Cross liturgy, I am deeply moved.

I like to write poems for the days when we celebrate the lives of people like St. Francis, who was a friend to all of God's creatures, or St. Patrick, who brought Christianity to Ireland. When I wrote "Francis Who Conversed with Birds" I tried to imagine his gentle nature as Francis stretched out his arms to the small chirping feathered creatures who alighted on them. When I wrote "St. Patrick: Voice of the Irish," I tried to imagine how this young Briton who had been seized and enslaved in Ireland felt after he escaped, made his way back to Britain and then heard the Irish calling him to return. What must it have cost him emotionally to go back?

Being a poet is a privilege; it gives me a lot of happiness when I finish a poem and feel that it is just right. I am so grateful to have this opportunity of sharing my poems with you.