

Rabbit Brush: What Renders Us Human

By Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer

At 4:30 a.m., I was the first person in Seattle to arrive at gate N-15 for the 6 a.m. Denver flight. I slunk into the black plastic chair, my feet propped up on my carry-on. The next passenger to arrive was a man in a leather-brimmed cap. He found a seat kitty corner from me across the aisle.

For half an hour, we had the terminal to ourselves. We chatted about fog, dying grandparents and airport security before talk turned to poetry. I'd just finished teaching an Intro to Poetry class at The Colorado College, and I mentioned how desperately I'd wanted the students to leave feeling that poetry was relevant to their lives.

"Some people don't think poetry has much value in the real world," I said.

"Those are the people who forget we are human beings," he said.

*

At first mention, people often resist poetry. Many of us have bad memories from high school or college where we learned that we could never understand what a poem meant. Usually, that's because our teachers didn't feel that they understand poetry, and they passed on their confusion and sense of disconnection.

Ironic. At its core, poetry is the language of connection. Its basic building blocks—imagery and metaphor—illuminate the relationships between the inner self and the outer world. "My love for you is like a red, red rose that's newly sprung in June," wrote Robert Burns in 1796. The world remembers his line because it resonates. In some deep-in-our-gut way, he enables us to connect an emotion, love, with an image, a rose.

OK. Burns' notion, so "newly sprung" in his day, has become overwrought. So we move on with our metaphors until we find a relationship that fits. Poetry is based on tools, not rules. It doesn't require us to stick to one framework. Sam Hamill responds to Burns by insisting that his love is "a common thing, a dandelion sprung suddenly up among the rubble and thistle." And I have a sonnet asserting "my love is like a rabbit brush, impossible to kill."

Each of these lines takes an object and compares it to an emotion. It's so simple, this method of understanding the world. But this comparison is what makes a poem relevant. It's how the poem invites us to talk about what it means to be alive.

*

"Attentiveness is my prayer." –Donna Gershten

*

Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer

Word Woman

What *does* it mean to be a human being? Philosophers and poets still work to answer this question. They haven't come up with anything definitive. That leaves room for you to have your own opinion and join this conversation. And you don't have to be a poet to join in. You don't need a PhD, an MD, a BA or any other letters except the 26 in our alphabet. What you need to do are these two things that poets do: Engage and Reflect.

Here's the irony. In order to answer the question, "What does it mean to be a human being?", you must first stop asking the question and simply engage. Think about a time when you felt really wonderful. Perhaps you were walking your dog or watching your daughter chase a squirrel in the park. Maybe you were baking brownies or playing basketball with your buds. Whatever you were doing at that marvelous time, I can promise you that you weren't thinking, "I'm feeling good." You were simply feeling. You were engaged. The moment we start to think, "I feel good," we are out of the feeling moment and into the analytical realm.

It's almost impossible to tell yourself not to think of something. As soon as you say, "Don't think of polar bears in Alaska," your brain inevitably goes to polar bears in Alaska. See?

But to really "get life," we must stop thinking. As poet Jude Janett says, "Get rid of the Q & A session." Stop asking the meaning of life, start living it. Take yourself to the place where there are no questions and no answers. Join the mystery.

The five tools for this process are our five senses: seeing, touching, smelling, tasting and hearing. It sounds elementary? Yes. No one gets this sensory stuff better than elementary school kids. I'm amazed when I go into schools how easily young students draw on their senses. If I ask them, "What did you hear this morning before school?," a flurry of hands flutter up and they sling back a slurry of responses: "My neighbor's dog barking." "The rustle of my sheets." "The bacon sizzling in the pan." They have strong sense memories because they are still literally trying to make *sense* of the world. As a result, they engage with their surroundings.

But I've noticed something happens around sixth grade. We begin to develop our inner world more completely and start to disengage with the outer world. Ask a middle or high schooler about what they heard that morning and many are at a loss for detail. They are too intent on listening to the voices in their heads: "Is my breath bad? That's so uncool. Life's so unfair. No one understands me. Should I eat that? She's a jerk ..."

As adults, we sometimes forget how to return to the attentive faculties. We analyze *ad nauseum*—a process our information-driven society prizes. But where do we get the information? Like good writers who do first hand research, to be good listeners we need to gather our information about our world first hand. One way to get back to it is to literally feed it. What's your favorite food? As soon as you get a chance, eat some of it. As you're eating, completely absorb yourself in the food's taste and texture. Don't describe it, just experience it. If your brain starts to butt in, acknowledge it. Say, "Thank you, please be quiet," and stay focused on the food, slowly chewing each bite. You might do this same exercise listening to a favorite song, looking at the sky, rubbing your hand over someone else's skin or inhaling a favorite lotion. The goal is to get to a place that language doesn't go.

If this is too hard initially, try noticing *after* the experience. At some point in your day, your brain may interject, “I’m miserable,” or, ideally, “I feel great.” Pay attention. What was just happening? Where did you feel it? What senses were engaged? Once you identify this kind of non-linguistic awareness, it’s easier to get back there—to be attentive without attaching meaning.

I like to use the word “engage” for this process. Engage not only implies that we connect with the world around us, it also suggests being “engaged,” as in a pre-marital relationship. When we’re engaged to be married, we choose to partner with someone else. When we’re engaged with the world—with people, landscape and spirit—we choose to be partners with our environment, seeing it not as something separate from ourselves but as something intimately related.

*

“You’re not paying attention,” said the Mad Hatter. “And if you don’t pay him, you know, he won’t perform.” —Lewis Carroll

*

The reward for paying attention? It gives us something to live for. As nature writer David Peterson says, “While I could live without writing, I could never live without the things I write about.” We don’t necessarily need to write about things to be in relationship with them, ahhh, but it can make us giddy when it happens. Poetry is the place where the engaged self meets language. It is the tongue of reflection.

Often, I think of the word “reflect” as meaning “to think quietly and calmly, to consider.” But the etymology leads us deeper into the poetic realm. *Reflect* comes from a Latin word meaning “to bend back.” This implies that we can’t reflect until after we have engaged, we give back. In our reflecting we give our experience voice—we mirror with words.

“At times the poet converses with the trees and the grasses, talks with the stars, greets the sun, and befriends all beings,” says Daisakn Ikada. “In these, he sees life and breathes life into them, finding in the changing phenomena of the world the unchanging principle of the universe.”

I believe, as Ikada says, that we breathe life into things by conversing with them. Until we notice things, they are dead *to us*. But the once we engage, we can join the discussion with all living things about what it means to be alive.

How do we develop our voice? Start simple. Forget about trying to make it sound good or have any profound consequence—simply describe what colors and shapes you see, what textures or temperatures you feel. Essayist Bruce Berger gave me this exercise: Next time you’re driving or walking, try to verbally describe everything you pass. Speak the words aloud or let them form in your head. Start with basics: green trees, red rock, small bird hopping. Then push yourself toward specifics. Add verbs—the world is in constant flux. The same observation might yield “citrus aspen leaves quivering in southerly wind gusts, crimson Cutler sandstone cliffs eroding into sand

Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer

Word Woman

at the base, Stellar's jay tugging on a golden stalk of rye. Look for the "thisness" of a thing—what assures you that it is what it is?

Internalize your observations. Breathe in the details and hold them in your awareness for awhile. Listen for the voices of things—wind in the sand, an unripe strawberry, rotten leaves. What do they say? Likely you won't hear a real voice, though some poets such as A. R. Ammons often transliterate the voices of the natural world. I've found that to listen to the voices of things, I simply need to be quiet and available to the moment. As Padma Jared Thornlyre once said to me, "It's key to bring the mind to silence so that hearing the world and the word becomes possible."

Gerard Manly Hopkins called this internalizing process "instress." When you instress, you don't merely register the details of a thing, you actually feel the force, or stress, that comes from within it. It's a resonance. It's as if the object of observation marks you—it *stresses* you—and leaves an imprint on your understanding.

In that resonance begins the conversation—an emotional/observational dialogue between you and the world. That connection is what poet Renee Gregorio once called *meeting the moment*. This practice of seeing our own lives in relationship to the world around us is the basis of poetry. It's also what renders us human: to not merely observe but to leap beyond what is seen and discover meaning or purpose, to find a metaphor that links us to the world around us. And metaphor is everywhere: in the spiral of the nautilus, in the smell of burning coffee, in the roughness of a heel. And what's wholly marvelous is that for every person, there is a different connection. There is no one way to interpret or respond. When we reflect, it's our intimate, personal way of echoing the world and discovering who we are. There is no guru to tell us, "This is the connection. This is how you feel when you see a pinecone in the road."

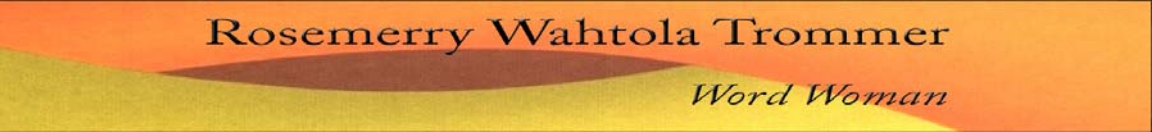
Inevitably, however, someone else's words will meet your emotions. This why, when you read Burns or Hamill or Trommer, and they assert that love is like a rose, a dandelion or a rabbit brush, you may say, "Yes! That's it!" You may not. Perhaps your love is a smooth river rock. Perhaps it's an office chair. There's no right or wrong. And there's no reason why love can't be a rock and a rose and an office chair all at once.

Students sometimes question their own voice. "Why should anyone listen to me?" they say. I sometimes feel that way. It keeps us accountable. But if you've engaged and honestly reflected, you can not help but be relevant when you add your voice to the many other voices, all of us trying to sing out the same thing: What does it mean to be alive?

For me, it has something to do with rabbit brush. And smooth gray rocks.

*

PS: Don't worry if the metaphors don't come at first. Patience. As U. S. Poet Laureate Billy Collins says, "If you sit long enough in an aviary, a bird will land on your head." Just be sure to wear a hat.



Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer

Word Woman

Lifelong Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer lives beside the San Miguel River in Placerville, Colorado. Visit her website at www.wordwoman.com.