

A Brief Autobiographical Reflection

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I am an emeritus professor of English at Oregon State University and author of a number of books. I taught for 38 years. But I've also been a Catholic deacon for 26 years, and my vocation as a deacon and my vocation as a writer have always been dependent on each other.

My fourth book of poetry, *Love Calls Us Here*, will be published this spring by Wildhouse Press in Boston, and many of the poems come out of my experiences as a deacon—at gravesides and baptisms and in hospitals and coffeeshops. “The Things of the World,” the poem that was published in *The Notre Dame Review*, is like a number of other poems in the book, a poem about the mystery we all glimpse in our ordinary lives, when we're just taking a walk, or doing the dishes, or watching an old movie.

I would say that writing and reading poetry are themselves spiritual practices, whatever the poem is about. “Poetry comes in the form of a blessing,” Stanley Kunitz says—“it is a form of spiritual testimony”—and in some way I think that's true for all of us who write.

For me anyway the value of poetry is very much like the value of prayer. It's intangible. When I'm writing a poem, I try to have the same “inner disposition” that Anthony De Mello says we should have in prayer, the sense, as he puts it, that “we embark upon this exercise not for ourselves alone but for the welfare of creation, of which we are a part, and that any transformation we experience will redound to the benefit of the world.” This is the hardest thing to believe, and the most freeing, and not just for poets but for all of us. That what we think and

feel matters. That the inner life is just as real as the outer, and finally even more so. That somehow we are all connected.

“We serve to complete the work of creation,” Teilhard de Chardin says, “even by the humblest work of our hands. A thought, a material improvement, a unique nuance of human love, the enchanting complexity of a smile or glance—the spiritual success of the universe is bound up with the release of every possible energy in it.”

This is the hardest thing to believe, and now and then I do: that somehow by our writing and our reading we make a difference to each other, a difference all the more precious because it’s so fragile and fleeting and small.