

## Experiments with Wild Grace by Chelan Harkin

WOAH. WHAT WAS THAT?! WHAT JUST HAPPENED THROUGH ME?!

That was 21 year old me tingling from head to toe and gaping in shocked awe at the computer screen after conducting an experiment on myself that saved, liberated and transformed my life.

I had been in a place of acute hopelessness and inner anguish in which I felt so profoundly alone in the world and disconnected from even the possibility of authentic connection. Somehow amidst all that I found the wherewithal to listen to an inner prompting that urged me to try an experiment.

This experiment was to allow myself to write a “bad poem” every day for a month. Writing poetry had been an important practice of mine for several years. I felt its potential to unlock something essential in myself but without knowing how to use this powerful, mysterious key my process had felt strained and tense. I felt very insecure about sharing my work and would typically take about a month to stitch a poem together and longer to patch together the confidence to share it with others. The terms of the experiment were to give myself an hour to write this bad poem, and at the end of that hour, whatever I’d come up with I would share. My desperate hope was that somehow this permission to essentially mess it all up would nudge me out of the paralysis of perfectionism I’d been stuck in for so long. Perhaps some genuine expression in my soul could loosen itself from the foot trap of right and wrong to gain more expressive mobility.

Some part of me knew I was held back by the deep fear of being unworthy, of being “bad”—a bad poet, a bad person, somehow pitted outside of the realm of the lovable. But the more I rejected that fear and that label and fled to the other direction to try to be good, impressive, worthy, the tighter the perfection chain pulled. It seems some deep and wise part of me knew if there was to be a way beyond these restrictive inner limitations, that I had to explore working with my fears rather than continuing to let them work against me.

On the second day of this experiment, I showed up to my uncomfortable chair in the computer lab at Evergreen State College and something cracked open in me in such an immense, radically different and wildly profound way that it changed my style of creative expression, my perspective and my life for ever more.

A Great and Mysterious Something had rushed through me. This Great Something was a poem but so much more than a poem. It was a catalyzing, paradigm tipping flood of enlivened inspired energy that carved a new channel in my being. The words were elegant and exact, unlocking and joyful, precise and free, inspired and loving. The poem came through me as fast as I could write it, in no more than two minutes and needed almost no editing.

What came through in this experience felt like a harmony with The Beyond rather than a solo with the self. Or perhaps more accurately, it felt like a symphony of all parts of self finally coming together in harmony.

I'll share that poem with you now:

SAY "WOW!"

Each day before our surroundings  
become flat with familiarity  
and the shapes of our lives click into place,  
dimensionless and average as Tetris cubes,  
  
before hunger knocks from our bellies  
like a cantankerous old man  
and the duties of the day stack up like dishes  
and the architecture of our basic needs  
commissions all thought  
to construct the 4-door sedan of safety,

before gravity clings to our skin  
like a cumbersome parasite  
and the colored dust of dreams  
sweeps itself obscure in the vacuum of reason,

each morning before we wrestle the world  
and our hearts into the shape of our brains,  
look around and say, "Wow!"

Feed yourself fire.

Scoop up the day entire  
like a planet-sized bouquet of marvel  
sent by the Universe directly into your arms  
and say, "Wow!"

Break yourself down  
into the basic components of primitive awe  
and let the crescendo of each moment  
carbonate every capillary  
and say, "Wow!"

Yes, before our poems become calloused  
with revision  
let them shriek off the page of spontaneity

and before our metaphors get too regular,  
let the sun stay

a conflagration of homing pigeons

that fights through fire

each day to find us.

It was no coincidence that this experiment allowed this flood of Wild Grace to happen. This experiment created an environment of deep acceptance in my mind and nervous system.

The insistence that something be “good” is a demand of performance that stunts and stifles creative expression. Creative expression is a dance of liberated truth that wants to be just as free to stumble as to whirl. Insisting that we be “good” keeps us tight, scared and small. It forces parts of us into the enslavement of performing loveless labors for our judgments. This experiment liberated those energies within me to finally rally together to share their gifts in the name of love. When we allow for more whole and powerful expression by including all of ourselves, something considerably more than the sum of our fragmented parts can emerge. This great surprise that can come through us when we are willing to make intentions and efforts to move ourselves beyond our old patterns is what I call Wild Grace.

Okay so fast forward to what felt like a Wildly GraceLESS time in my life a decade later. Hundreds of these poems had poured through me in this way by then and I had still not moved forward even slightly with my dream of dreams, to publish a book of my poetry. It was November 2020, I was three months postpartum and had likely been in sweatpants even longer. Creative inspiration was at its driest since this original breakthrough and I felt cutoff and quite lame. Mercifully, it can be when we are at our most thirsty that we finally prioritize and do whatever is needed to seek water. When the inner well has dried up, we get to a point where there is nothing that can be done but for our parched souls to take the risk into the desert to search for the hope of a new oasis.

In a fervor of inner necessity to explore the new, I finally found juuust enough courage within a frothing, tumultuous sea of vulnerability to consider taking up another experiment to test whether or not my mountain of limiting assumptions about publishing my work were true.

My short list of terrifying assumptions were these:

- 1.) People don't care about poetry at all.

2.) People will laugh at me and think it's childish for moving forward with publishing my book (grow up and get a real job, Chelan).

3.) People will pity buy my book and it will be humiliating

4.) People will think I'm very weird.

5.) I will put the bird of my dreams forth and its wings will be too small or somehow incapable to take to the sky.

6.) My dream will fail and then I won't even have that to lean on and prop me up when my life becomes mundane and dull.

7.) These layers of self that I've worked so hard to hide and protect will be seen and that will just be too unbearably vulnerable!

6.) Because I often use the word "God" in my poetry in surprising ways, people who aren't religious will be uncomfortable by that and people who are religious or identified with a spiritual path will think me heretical.

7.) People are only interested in male voices...maybe I should take on a male pen name?

8.) Basically, I'll be judged and rejected up and down in every way and collapse from this, my life will spiral out of control and I'll become a dysfunctional, publicly humiliated, hopeless case.

9.) My fears will be proven true.

Yep. And that's just the short list.

Of course each of these little darlings was cleverly weighted to profoundly uncomfortable emotional anchors keeping the whole show of forward movement securely held down.

During the decade of immobile dreams, I had used the deliciously self-avoidant tool of magical thinking to actively work around honesty with myself about my discomfort with the items on this list. I had a strong case of what I call, “Fairy Godmother Syndrome” essentially fantasizing that a benevolent publisher would somehow discover me, swoop down upon the golden egg of my poetry, gather it up in her clutches and take it to the apex of unimaginable heights without me really having to learn or grow or encounter anything hard.

Fairy Godmother Syndrome is very different than Wild Grace. Fairy Godmother Syndrome involves self avoidance and denial of yourself, your beautiful humbling process that allows you to finally bow deep enough to kiss your struggles, the strengthening dig in the dirt to discover deep enough worthiness to claim your hidden gems. Wild Grace is not enabling. She is delighted for you to move through every fire in yourself that you will no longer experience the pain you encounter as an obstacle but an entryway into transformation and deeper self-knowledge.

I was both ravenous for and deeply afraid of another wallop from Wild Grace. She is so big and turns your life over in such unexpected ways. I was so scared of no longer being small. But at the same time, the patterns keeping me small had become more of a confine than a protection and it was time to experiment again.

What would happen when I asked for what I wanted—would people think I was selfish, too much? What would happen if I honored my joy? What if emotional discomfort could be an entryway rather than an obstacle and I could move through it into deeper self-knowledge, broader perspective and deeper resilience? What if there was value in sharing my gifts that would add nourishment? What if instead of my fears of the worst things I could imagine coming to pass, things more wonderful than I could imagine were awaiting me?

Asking questions like these and moving forward with investigative curiosity showed me that our ideas about ourselves and our lives aren’t as fixed as we pretend them to be and that if we become agents of our joy rather than victims of our fears we can change everything. The attitude of curiosity in the process of experimenting gives permission to allow unknowns rather than demand certitudes or any particular outcome. It requires the courage and humility to say, “I wonder...” rather than “I know.”

Each aching vulnerable, quaking step forward on the path to publishing my book, Susceptible to Light, was only made possible because I had framed it as an experiment, a gathering of information rather than a move that could ultimately be “right” or “wrong.”

Also, each courageous step forward was affirmed by this energy of Wild Grace as though it were a wind blowing into my sails. And as I felt this energy working with me I became more resilient, learning to trust it more and exponentially began taking more loving risks toward joy as more and more I felt this energy of life would have my back.

This poem I'll share below was one of my biggest experiments of all. It came through a couple days before my book went public and I considered not even adding it to the collection because of another bout of limiting assumptions around how it might be received. But it sung to my soul in a special way and one of my greatest findings in these forays with experiment is that Wild Grace is found in not hiding that song. This poem went viral and has opened so many doors that have debunked every original point on that above list and have shown me in no uncertain terms that so often when we test our limiting assumptions, all they can do is bow before newly discovered truths about how this glorious world so beautifully longs to receive us.

### The Worst Thing We Ever Did

The worst thing we ever did  
was put God in the sky  
out of reach  
pulling the divinity  
from the leaf,  
  
sifting out the holy from our bones,  
insisting God isn't bursting dazzlement  
through everything we've made  
a hard commitment to see as ordinary,  
stripping the sacred from everywhere  
to put in a cloud man elsewhere,  
prying closeness from your heart.

The worst thing we ever did  
was take the dance and the song  
out of prayer  
made it sit up straight  
and cross its legs  
removed it of rejoicing  
wiped clean its hip sway,  
its questions,  
its ecstatic yowl,  
its tears.

The worst thing we ever did is pretend  
God isn't the easiest thing  
in this Universe  
available to every soul  
in every breath.

In some way or another, everything in our lives is an experiment. We are constantly acting on the world and receiving feedback. When we are willing to experiment we move from passive recipient of our lives to an intentional participant in our lives. We enter a collaborative process with Wild Grace to co-create an experience of ourselves and our lives beyond our old patterns. Experiment is not about outcome. It is about tasting the extremely satisfying experience of joyful, wholesome liberation in being able to play with our old patterns rather than be bound by them. It is about bit by bit coming to trust the unknown. It allows us to venture into the beautiful frontiers of what might be. So experiment on, human explorers! Wild Grace is eager for you to get moving so she can begin her adventure through you and serve the world with your joy.

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For more inspiration, join this Saturday's Awakin Call with Chelan Harkin: "Let Us Dance- Inspired Poetry and Ecstatic Expression." More details and RSVP info here.