

The Incomparable Naomi Shihab Nye on Kindness by Kim Rosen

□The poems of Naomi Shihab Nye have an uncanny way of showing up at exactly the right moment to summon you below the surface of your life. The child of a Palestinian father and an American mother, her poems speak a language deeper than culture, history or religion. Through the portal of the everyday—a grocery store, an olive press, the headlines—she draws us into the most profound questions and revelations of the soul. In addition to writing poetry, Nye writes fiction, essays and children’s books, and has edited several anthologies.

□KIM ROSEN: What do you feel is the role of poetry, especially in these times?

□NAOMI SHIHAB NYE: Poetry helps us imagine one another’s lives. It gives us intimate insights into someone else’s experience. To be able to have that kind of insight in thirty seconds or three minutes is a very precious kind of transmission. It’s not cluttered with a lot of extraneous, explanatory matter or the kind of chatter that comes so easily on the news these days. We’re surrounded by talk and language and reporting and stories of a certain kind, the “breaking news” kind, but I think we hunger for another kind of story, the story that helps us just feel connected with one another, be with one another. A slower kind of empathy. I think we hunger for that now more than ever.

□Once we have the experience of absorbing a poem and feeling that appetite satisfied, then we have access to a language that is devoted to transporting the spirit. Just as there is something inside a compass that causes it to always return to true North, so there is something in poetry that can harmonize and refocus us.

□You just need one poem and the right attention for that poem. You read that poem, you hold it in you, you reread it, and you feel like a room that is cleansed and freshened and rearranged, where everything is folded and put away in its proper place. Not all poems are this way, of course; certainly some poems are filled with their own kind of clutter. But to find a poem that harmonizes you, to feel that clarity and know it’s there, it’s available for you and anytime you feel overwhelmed -- wow. What could be better?

□KIM: Many of your poems are almost subversively spiritual. They offer the intimacy of becoming one with someone that you never thought you could relate to. So I’m wondering, do you have a spiritual path that you follow yourself? Were you brought up in a spiritual path?

□NAOMI: I was brought up on a very ecumenical path. Neither of my parents practiced the religions of their own families. My father hadn’t really rejected Islam but he had just never been a practitioner and had known, even as a child, that he didn’t intend to be devout in a traditional, official way. My mother had actually rejected the narrowness,

as she saw it, of her parents' Lutheran Christianity. She tried to develop in herself, and instill in her family and friends or anyone who was interested, a much more ecumenical sense of spirituality and possibility. She took me to the Vedanta Society in St. Louis for ten years, between the ages of three and fourteen. That was a very beautiful initiation into a world of spiritual practices. My mother also sent me to Bible School in the summer sometimes, then later to a Unity Sunday School. And so, there was a sense that there's not one right path, one best way. You're open and you find elements that appeal to you from various paths. So I've never felt, in my own life, a desire or an urgency to have one practice to the exclusion of any others.

□ There is something very comforting about ritual. I have friends who go to church or sit at the Zen center. I respect that. The ritual of writing fills that need for me. Writing has been a kind of spiritual devotion for me. Listening to language, feeling stories unfold and poems arrive, being present to the page – I do not think of it as a career, I think of it as a devotion. That is a big difference to me.

□ I have respect for all paths that respect one another. I do not have respect for a lot of piety and righteousness or self absorbed, "this is the best way" attitude. I don't really understand the fear that must be involved or the kind of protectionism or tribalism in Evangelical movements, whether it's Evangelical Islam or Evangelical Christianity. I don't really understand the need to be right to the exclusion of someone else being right. What if those of us who love poetry said poetry is more right than dance, for example, or poetry is more right than steel drum music. Or a sonnet is real and an open form poem is not real. Or haiku is right and villanelle is wrong.

□ KIM: In fact, I have a hunger to revel in the realms of not knowing, don't you?

□ NAOMI: Oh, absolutely. We love the mystery. We love what's coming next. We love not knowing the next form in which we might write something.

□ KIM: There are some pretty fierce lessons in your poem "Kindness." How did you come to write that poem?

□ NAOMI: My husband, Michael, and I were on our honeymoon in Colombia in 1978. We knew we were in a difficult country filled with drug smugglers, but we were both optimists and felt we would be able to make it through. We ended up being robbed on a bus in the middle of the night. They took everything we had—passports, tickets, cameras, all our money—everything. It was a very stark experience. An Indian on our bus was killed, and there was the feeling that we could be next.

□ We got back on the bus, and the Indian was just left by the side of the road. We decided that Michael would have to hitchhike, even though it was very dangerous, to a larger city where he hoped he could get our travelers checks reinstated. I was left alone in this unknown town. I had no idea how would I eat or where I would sleep for the days until he returned.

□ I sat down in the plaza at the center of the town. All I had left was a little paper notebook and a pencil that had been in my back pocket (talk about traveling light!). I was trembling. It was twilight. I took out my pencil. I need a little guidance here, I thought. I need to know what to do next. And the poem "Kindness" seemed to float through the air of that little town and land on my page. It was like automatic writing; I wasn't writing down concepts that I already knew and took for granted or had seen in practice. The "you" in the poem is really me. I felt like some element in the air was speaking to me: "Before you

know what kindness really is, you must lose things.”

□Once I had written it down, things came clearer. I knew what I could do to find something to eat, where I might go to find a place to sleep. This gift of openness and possibility overtook the sense of being stricken. The poem was a lever I held onto as I found my way.

□There was this gang of street ragamuffins who collected Coke bottles and turned them in for a few pesos so they could buy a bun to eat. I realized they knew something I needed to know: when you have nothing, where do you get a bit of food? I showed them that I had nothing, no bag, no purse, no wallet, nothing, and I needed their help. They were so gracious! They allowed me to join their group and eat a bun now and then.

□Once the poem was printed, it started having its own life. Now it belongs to so many people in different ways. I’ve always believed poems are in the air around us. If we listen in a certain way, they will find us. If we allow them into our minds and consciousness, they can help us and then if we send them out, any way we can, then there’s the possibility of them having a bigger life than any life we could ever have dreamed for them.

□KIM: If you could have your deepest desire, what effect would your poems have on readers and the world?

□NAOMI: More peace. I would hope that a poem about the Middle East, for example, would make anyone who read it less willing to place a group of people into the enemy category. And also, a sense of peacefulness – in people’s lives, in society – a sense of possibility, that things can work out.

□I want my poems to befriend you. I don’t want you to read a poem and feel like it was a test or a maze or a puzzle, or that it took you somewhere and now you have no idea where you are. I want you to feel as if you met a new friend and wouldn’t mind seeing them again. I think that feeling has a lot to do with peace, because when we feel befriended in the world, we feel more peaceful. We feel as if, you know, we’re safer and more connected to one another.