

Interview with Jane Hirshfield conducted by Mark Eaton and Abigail Keegan

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Mark Eaton: Growing up in Manhattan, did you think yourself as a child of the city? How do you think your upbringing was similar to or different from someone who grew up in, say, California? And now that you've lived in California for many years, do you consider yourself a westerner?

Jane Hirshfield: Well, it's interesting—though I was born in New York City and lived in New York City until I moved away to college, my earliest memories are of my first trip to the country, when I was two. I remember lying on my back, with the taste of blackberries in my mouth and something in me must have thought, "This is how the world is supposed to be." Even though I was a city child, I found a little scrap of box hedge near my apartment, and I'd go hide in it, turn it into a world. I made my way to a more rural existence as soon as I could. It's also true that growing up in New York was a wonderfully rich cultural environment. I saw ballets and was taken to the opera; I spent a lot of hours in the Metropolitan Museum. The richness of the city contributed to who I am, but I can't imagine ever moving back there.

As for whether or not I'm now a "California poet," I'm put on panels fairly regularly to talk about being a California poet, and every time this happens I think quietly to myself, "Do I belong here?" The result is that I've come up with a rather peculiar definition of California poets, one which I also think is actually true. My list of archetypal California poets begins not with Robert Frost, who was born in San Francisco and lived there until he was 11, and then became of course the quintessential New England poet, but with Robinson Jeffers—who didn't come to California until he was a young adult. But then my list gets a little stranger. Another classic California poet, in my opinion, is Bertolt Brecht, who, as a refugee during WWII, lived in Southern California and wrote some quite extraordinary poems about Hollywood, about California gardens, about the relocation camps the Japanese were put into. A third quintessential California poet, I think, is Czeslaw Milosz, the Polish/Lithuanian Nobel Laureate who has lived in the Bay Area the last 30 or 40 years.

The generality I draw is this: part of the very nature of California poets, for all except the Native Americans, is to be a guest. We are all visitors who have had to forge a new relationship with a new place. I know one poet whose family has been in California for five generations. Almost all the rest of us have recently arrived. California is a place of change, of flux, of multiculturalism, of facing West as well as East. The fact that it's a Pacific Rim culture is, I'm sure, in part why I am happy there. Even living in New York City, Asian influences were something I was drawn to, so one can't attribute my interest in that area solely to living in California, but maybe I can say that's partly why I ended up there. Robert Pinsky, who lived in the Bay Area for many years, never considered himself a California poet and is much happier now that he lives in the east again. For me, it's as though I found my way to the place where I belonged.

ME: What is your earliest memory of reading poetry, and when did you first start writing poems? Was there a specific moment when you realized you wanted to be a writer?

JH: This is more a general recollection than a particular one, but I know that as soon as I was taught to read, I began to write. I took to it like a duck to water. My mother has a sheet of paper, one of those big brownish sheets with the

large blue lines on it, that says, "I want to be a writer when I grow up." I must have written that in first or second grade.

My theory is that Mrs. Barlow, my first teacher, must be responsible, because there's no other explanation. I probably wrote one nice thing and she said, "That's good, dear," and I was set for life. I wrote all through my childhood. I wrote for school, and I also hid the poems I wrote on my own under the mattress. Writing was my way, I think, of finding a place in my life where I could become myself. In the privacy of my relationship to words and the page, I could figure out what kind of person I was, what I felt, who I wanted to be. I was an insomniac as a child, so I'd stay up late at night, often until three in the morning, writing poems, and then sleep in math class the next day. The first book of poetry that I bought was a little haiku collection, a one-dollar hardback. I liked school, I liked learning, I liked thinking about things. I believe a poet is someone who, as Henry James says of fiction writers, "must be one on whom nothing is lost," and more—a poet must be one who is curious about everything, because so much of the way a poet thinks is through metaphor, through finding some other way besides the direct to the image or idea that will clarify what we're thinking or feeling, or expand it in some surprisingly mysterious way. Poets need to know science, and history, need to know the names of rocks and trees and birds. Poets need to know other poetry, but also facts. Take Robert Pinsky's poem, "The Shirt"; I'm sure he had to do research for that. I doubt it was all in his head. I've occasionally begun researching poems. For instance, a while ago I started a poem about ink. I knew as I began the poem that I would need some technical information before I could finish it, and I went researching and found out quite a few facts about ink. What it's made of, how it sticks to the page. That's an unusual process for me, but I loved doing it.

ME: So do you think poets are typically polymaths?

JH: I think so, at least many of them. Look at Emily Dickinson. We think of her as leading a sequestered life, but in fact, she spent two years in college and came from a family of educators. Her poems are full of the sciences of her day, and the cultural issues of her day, some of which we don't even realize without a scholarly apparatus pointing out how broad her frame of reference really was.

Abigail Keegan: I can see many ways Buddhism influences your work, such as your attentiveness to mindfulness and compassion. As a former Benedictine nun, I am curious about what made you enter a monastery. I am also curious to know if when you look back on that period, your view of that has changed, and if those changes in perception are recorded in your writing?

JH: I continue to feel that the years I spent at the Zen monastery at Tassajara are the diamond at the center of my life, from which everything since has emerged, and to which everything I do is still connected. Unlike Catholicism, in Buddhism, monastic time is always looked at as a limited period of training; to leave the monastery is what you're expected to do, not an abandonment or a failure. You spend, traditionally, a thousand days in intensive training. In Japan, even priests will go back to a temple in their community, marry, have families. For most of their lives they are not in a monastery. I spent three years in monastic life, and eight years living and working within the larger Buddhist community, devoting myself, fulltime, to Zen practice. Still, I always understood it as a training period.

My feeling is that one needs to be able to bring spiritual life and "ordinary life" together, or else what is the point? A true spiritual path can't be true for everyone if it can't exist under all circumstances—not only special or protected circumstances, but in every circumstance. The monastic time offered a centering of intention and the development of a certain way of being in the world. I see that as a gift given to me, in order to bring into the practice of everything I now do. Something in me can tell in each moment whether I'm living with a greater or lesser awareness. Washing dishes, teaching, gardening. I can feel when I leave or reenter the feeling of a realized interconnection. I think this does affect my poems, but I also genuinely believe that all good poets have made their way to the same relationship with their world. Galway Kinnell, who has no background in Buddhism, once said that "The title of every good poem could be 'Tenderness'." I do think that's so; I think that good poems, even if it's at a very subterranean level, feel compassion, they feel connection to all things.

I once tried testing this theory. By asking my friends to name the most misanthropic poem they could think of. About half identified the same poem I came up with, Philip Larkin's "This Be the Verse." I don't know if you can print this; it begins, "They fuck you up, your mum and dad, they do not mean to, but they do." When I examined that poem closely. I thought, "Ok, this is a good poem, so where is the compassion?" I found I could do a complete Buddhist analysis of the poem in which it emerges as a work with great compassion, with a longing for liberation from suffering in every part. It was quite startling to see how much that poem is not merely vituperative; it has a very tender heart under its cynical surface.

AK: You created a very unusual anthology of women's sacred writings from around the world. I would like you to talk about your reason for editing *Women in Praise of the Sacred*, and what the impact was on you of creating that work.

JH: I did that book because I went looking for it and found it didn't exist. It was the kind of book that should have been done ten years before I did it, but it had not. Part of what made me interested was discovering Japanese Heian-era literature when I was in college, and finding out about the golden age of literature created by women writers 1000 to 1200 years ago. I learned that the premise of having no women-writers as predecessors, as told in Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own," is not in fact the whole truth. What Woolf said was very important. It's a remarkable essay, and it's very important that she wrote it, but it's not fully the truth. The truth is that women have always expressed themselves, though their writings have not always been preserved. Because I had the good fortune of knowing this, I was quite confident that if I went looking for the poems, I would find them.

By then of course the basic groundwork had already been laid, in several historical anthologies of women's poetry. But none of them concentrated on the spiritual aspect; if anything, they avoided it, turning toward either politics or family life for their themes. Because of my background as a Zen student I thought this other lineage of women's writing and knowledge needed also to be made available. It is my temperament to want to look everywhere, and almost everywhere I looked, I found poems. I love the indigenous poems that are in that book.

I love that I stumbled onto the fact that the world's earliest identified author of any kind was a woman--a Sumerian moon priestess, Enheduanna, who lived around 2300 B.C. I loved finding a mystical poet who lived on a Welsh potato farm. The voices in *Women in Praise of the Sacred* were not only, as you would expect, those of women from the upper classes—who would have been educated, and so given the capacity to write—but they were also those of

former slaves, and of illiterate women whose words were recorded by others. The mere fact of these women's existence is encouraging, especially to younger women. For hundreds of years, women were continually reinventing the wheel of their own existence as writers. I think we have reached the end of that process; finally the voices are acknowledged.

As for the impact of the anthology on my own work, I don't think it changed my own poetry, in which the spiritual content tends to be under the surface. There are fewer references to Buddhism in my poems than I find in a great many writers, who are not Buddhist at all. What working on *Women in Praise of the Sacred* did do was give me, rather late in life, a wonderful education in both women's history and religious history. This was simply its own joy. One of the best things about doing an anthology is that it sends you hunting, and you find things that you wouldn't necessarily have found if you weren't hunting.

AK: I have read in several places that you do teach and edit, as well as write, but in the profile he wrote about you in *Ploughshares* magazine, Peter Harris said that you choose not to permanently institutionalize yourself in a university. What advantages and disadvantages does that offer you?

JH: I only have a Bachelor's degree, and so for a long time I assumed that I couldn't teach even if I wanted to, because I didn't have the credentials. It turns out that with sufficient publication, degrees don't matter, and I discovered that I love to teach. I began teaching at summer conferences, and spent five years working in poetry in the schools programs, and then began being offered chances to teach at the college level. I am afraid though that if I did it full time, all my energy would go to teaching, and I wouldn't get my own writing done.

I've taught one university course a year for a long time now, and that feels like the right balance for me. It means that I maintain a connection with the intellectual world of academia, which I value tremendously and which provides a very good home for many poets. I'm not one of those people who will say that teaching is bad for poetry, or the universities are bad for poetry. For me, though, I know I simply don't have the stamina to do both things completely. Sometimes I teach, sometimes I edit non-fiction books, sometimes I write. One advantage to living as I now do is I get to come here. I travel a good deal, and everywhere I go I find a vivid, passionate relationship to the world, and to the word. Getting on too many airplanes is probably not good for a person, and you have to find a balance, but I find it an immense privilege to be able to support myself in part by going to different places to talk about poetry, hear poetry, meet poets, see how the word in its best form thrives and lives in this huge country.

ME: I have a follow up question on your experience in the monastery.

Harbour Winn [Director of both Oklahoma City University's Film Institute and the Center for Interpersonal Studies through Film and Literature at OCU] remarked to me earlier that the monastery was, in a sense, your Walden Pond, the place where you developed this extraordinary ability to observe the world around you, as well as presumably to focus on your own inner resources. What are some of the various Walden Ponds people have used to develop that kind of attentiveness?

JH: I think that any life activity in which you can pay attention in a sustained way and get to know something intimately can be a Walden Pond. For a pianist, Walden Pond might be a body of work that you learn to play on the

piano. For a farmer it would be the land. Any good farmer knows the effect of every two-inch change in elevation on the land, knows where the cold winds blow and where the water accumulates. Almost anything could provide such a focus: what's important isn't the object, but your relationship to it. I can see a hairdresser learning an entire way of being in the world by concentrating on this strange stuff that grows out of the top of our heads. Awakened attentiveness comes when you engage anything in an intimate way. It also comes with caring about it. That might be the other essential thing: to want to do the thing you do, so that it sustains you and you sustain it.

At Tassajara I lived three years with no electricity and no heat, in tiny cabins with thin wooden walls, screened windows, and kerosene lamps. I heard mountain lions go down to the creek bed in the summer. I fought a forest fire at one point. This was the life I wanted, and so it sustained me. At Tassajara, the bell rings at 3:40 in the morning, and you wake. This means that you are awake to see the light come and to see the light go. This way of life was very helpful to someone who grew up in a city, where you're thrown continually back into the mind, the experience of being a monastic threw me into my body, and a poet needs the knowledge of the body as well as the mind. The silence, too, is useful—there's very little talking in the monastic day. Most of the time there's what's called the "great silence": between about 7:30 at night and 11:00 in the morning, there's basically no speech. Even during work hours you're not supposed to talk, except for necessary interchanges. I think that living in silence probably altered my relationship to language in the same way that living without utilities altered my relationship to the physical world. Each in its own way honed me.

ME: In *Nine Gates* you speak of the "liminal consciousness" of the writer and compare the writer's life to a monk's. Can you explain what you mean by living the "threshold life" of the writer?

JH: I think that all good poets, though perhaps some more than others, are people who are able to step outside of their own identities and be available to everyone and everything around them. It is this permeability and freedom from a narrow self that Keats describes when speaking of Shakespeare as possessing a "negative capability," and anthropologists call dwelling in the threshold. The need to open yourself to the multiplicity of being is deeply embedded in the nature of writing: good writing can't be done from a narrow and self-centered point of view. It must, at some level, make itself available to the rest of existence, must speak for what isn't already being said, as well as for what is.

One of the things people often ask me is, "What do you feel about the condition of poetry in America today?" And poetry, of course, is currently having a flurry of resurgence. Bill Moyers is putting poets on television; poems are on the display boards on buses. I have a poem going up on a brass plaque at a bus stop in San Francisco; I find poems on tags of dresses that I buy. This dress I'm wearing today, actually. Four lines from Wordsworth were attached to it for no reason at all, except that they were there. I thought, "How could I not buy such a dress?" Poets are not rock and roll stars and we're not movie stars, but I think that's good. One of the jobs of art is to move to the margin and find out what things look like from there. There's plenty of mainstream media talking about what life looks like at the center of this culture's concerns. It is the job of art to always turn towards what's being neglected, to attend to what isn't being looked at. Poetry will never be hugely remunerative, and that's ok. The kind of celebrity-worship at the center of our culture is not good for deep thinking. Celebrity and true thought are not compatible. Being at the center and being continually looked at locks you into what you're being rewarded for, into

what won you that place at the center. But poets need to move, need to travel hidden, leafy pathways toward the next poem. The fact that we're not going to be on the bestseller list, no matter what we do, gives us more room to move, to change, to alter. You can't lose much because there isn't much to lose. A threshold existence allows the writer to be permeable within the work itself, to speak of whatever comes up—of the many beings, and of emotions that aren't necessarily the first that come to mind. I think this is a valuable and necessary thing, for the poet and for the larger culture.

AK: In your essay "Facing the Lion," you discussed a common theme in Western literature, the idea that "wisdom is obtained... through transgression and paid for in suffering." How do you find this theme appearing in your own writing? What limits or boundaries must you transgress to achieve the kind of wisdom we find in your poetry?

JH: That's a lesson I learned while researching *Women in Praise of the Sacred*. I saw it over and over and over. Every woman in that book, with the exception, I think, of the Native American shamans, experienced some great fracture in their lives, a place of breakage. That breakage would be seen as tragedy if that's all you looked at, yet in the end it was a great gift, because it released the women from societal expectations and opened them to become themselves. The theme also appeared overtly, in certain myths.

The idea that wisdom can only be won through transgression is actually a Western-culture idea; it's not so prevalent in the East. There's the romantic idea that every painter has to be like Van Gogh--that there's no great art without madness dogging its heels. But that's not necessarily so, and I think it's important that we recognize it isn't. My own life has brought me to this: I don't think the artist has to seek out suffering, because it will come to us. None of us is able to escape loss or death. Everything we love will leave us; nothing can be kept. We're not safe. So, certainly my own work has emerged out of my own grief, but I don't think I need to seek suffering out. I think it simply happens and then it is my job--just as a tree will grow new wood around a wound--to find the poetry which includes that grief. My job is not to push it away, but also not to seek it out.

AK: One of the students you met, Sadie Bruce, told me to ask you why you are so happy. There is an unusual knowledge of happiness in your work, an acknowledgement that there are things to be known about happiness. Since Modernism, there really hasn't been a lot of knowledge of happiness spoken about in the arts. That is the transgression in your work: your voice gives us new permissions. Students appreciate coming to your work. For instance in the poem, "Percolation," they like the movement you make in the lines, "surely all Being at bottom is happy/ soaked to the bane, sopped at the root." It isn't that you erase pain, but you admit the knowledge of happiness and well-being into your poetry.

ME: I had the same experience with students: we were reading all these depressed poets. Sylvia Plath, and so on. Then we discovered a comment by Denise Levertov that said, "plenty of poets also happen to be mad, but madness is not a prerequisite for poetry."

JH: Well, I think of my happiness as actually being quite hard won. I was miserable as a child, and I am still completely capable of falling into deep gloom at this point in my life, but perhaps I would rather choose another

way. A phrase I sometimes use to name this gesture in my work is "affirming the difficult." I've written quite a few poems about that, for example the poem called "'Happiness," about St. Francis. In that poem he's shown not only letting the animals come to him, but also welcoming loneliness, desperation, fear, anger. I think this is the only way. You can't be happy by self-delusion, you can't be happy by forcing your unhappiness away and pretending it doesn't exist. If you try to, as the "Facing the Lion" essay says, it will come back and bite you. To ignore suffering is not the path. The path is to be glad to let the lion come into your life and ruin it. That is the only viable route toward a life we can agree to fully live.

To know the fullness of being is actually my intention, as a writer and as a person. To say, "I will experience the entire range, and I will say 'no' to no part of it,"--this is my wish. I remember one very positive review of *October Palace* which said something like, "Who could believe that a book that has the word 'happiness' in it this many times could be a good book?" I laughed.

AK: Since WWI and II we've had good reason for our intellectual and artistic fears and doubts about a sense of well-being, but we must be open to more. I think you are a voice that speaks of other possibilities.

JH: And the difference between real and superficial happiness, that's important to remember as well. When I wrote "Percolation," the poem you just quoted, I had been thinking for weeks, "Oh I hate this rain, this weather is miserable." Then, by writing the poem, I welcomed it, and so changed my relationship to the rain. "All Being at bottom is happy." When I myself was finally soaked through completely, that became true.

On another occasion, my neighbors had a child who was learning to play piano. When I came into my writing studio, all I heard was plunk, plunk, plunk, plunk: I was furious. Then I thought, "How are you going to get past this? The child needs to learn to play piano." And so instead of pushing the sound away, I wrote a poem, "Justice Without Passion," which began, "My neighbor's son, learning piano, moves his fingers through the passages a single note at a time." Once I had written the poem, I didn't mind the sound anymore. I think this approach comes out of Buddhist training, in which you learn that you have to work with the things in your life. Our task is to not just experience greed, aversion, or delusion--the three basic ways Buddhists identify an unawakened being in the world- but to turn them around.

The way you change is by noticing what your proclivities are and then seeing what other responses are possible: to hear the sound of that piano practice and somehow conceive the thought, "Can I realize that this boy and I are one?" Writing that poem allowed me to let his being into my being, and then I wasn't angry anymore. I was happy, in a deep way.

AK: You have used Theodore Roethke's line, "I learn by going where I have to go," to describe your own writing process. So where are you going now in your work? Do you have something you want to discover?

JH: Most of the time I really don't know where I'm going. Most of the time each new poem arrives straight from mystery, and I only find out in the writing of it what it is that I'm doing, thinking, feeling. But occasionally, as happened with the book "The Lives of the Heart," a theme does arise. I suddenly realized I was writing a lot of poems that had the word "heart" in them, and I became conscious that I had in fact embarked on a project. Now, in

my next book of poems, again there's something quite different going on than anything I've done before. Beginning a couple years ago, I found that much more of the human realm had entered in my poetry. There are people, there are sentences that take place in dialogue, with quotation marks. There are many more household objects—spoons and carpets and chairs and mugs. It's not as though there's none of this in the earlier poems, but there's much more in the current work. Something simply changed, and I can't explain it. I don't know where it came from. But to do something new is always good. rather than to repeat what you already know how to do, and so I'm interested in this sudden incursion of the human world into my work at this late stage. Perhaps it is as the poet Novalis said: "We spend the first half our lives looking inward, the second half looking out." Maybe the time simply arrived for me to attend more to the common life we all share.