

# Robert Pinsky

"If you could write one great poem, what would you want it to be about?"

- from *The Figured Wheel: New and Collected Poems*

**[Kate: some of these excerpts have been rearranged from the original. As you transcribe, all should be reordered back to the original published version.]**

**JT:** What is the responsibility of the poet laureate?

**Pinsky:** It is largely an honorary post. In response to the upsurge of interest in poetry in the United States in the last decade or so, people like Rita Dove and Joseph Brodsky and Robert Haas have interpreted it as a more proactive operation.

**JT:** So you are able to decide what kind of project or program you would like to put in place?

**Pinsky:** Well, in recent years because of the example set by former laureates, the current laureate has been encouraged to start a project. I think in the future the Poetry Society of America and The Academy of American Poets will help provide some continuity and provide suggestions to whomever holds the post, although I also believe it should be possible for a person to hold the post and treat it as an honorary position, and not necessarily do as much work as Bob and Rita and I have done.

**JT:** Have there been any surprises for you in the two years you've held the position? Do you feel like you've learned anything new?

**Pinsky:** The really gratifying surprise has been attending Favorite Poem readings in different towns and cities and seeing the passion-ate, unpredictable, vigorous life of poetry in people's lives. That's been a surprise and a source of enjoyment.

**JT:** About your particular project, the Favorite Poem Project, you've said you want people to offer their favorite poems to each other and to the community as a whole, and that you want to build an archive of poems that Americans love at the end of the millennium. I noticed as well that you used a line from Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium" as the epigram to your book, *The Sounds of Poetry*. The line says, "Nor is there singing school but studying / Monuments of its own magnificence." Is the Favorite Poem Project a kind of "singing school?" A way for us all to learn?

**Pinsky:** Inevitably, attending to practice in any art that means a lot to people will lead to people wanting to emulate the things they've heard. So yes, "singing school" is studying monuments to magnificence, and many people who read poems in this project are saying, 'This is something I think is magnificent.'

**JT:** I'll play the role here of the question man from your poem, "Song of Reasons." Do you have a hero?

**Pinsky:** I have several heroes. Jackie Robinson was one of my first heroes when I was a kid. He was my favorite player, and I was aware that he was a social hero as well. I have always admired proficiency and independence. Skill and the stubborn pursuit of that skill as it shows up in a Charlie Parker or a Bobby Fischer... that kind of excellence has an appeal to me. Odysseus is my favorite hero in literature because he's reflective, inventive — a corner-cutting, shrewd character I find quite interesting. He's not merely a killer, he's also a very good thinker.

**JT:** In your poem, "Song of Reasons," you speak of the rituals we use to begin our days. What is your doorway into the day as a poet?

**Pinsky:** I like to read the newspaper in the morning. I like to read a lot of newspapers. I like reading things I don't really know or care much about because it is like the pulse of the world beginning. I'll sometimes have a happy time with the financial pages, or reading about something I don't care about at all like hockey and the sports pages, or review of a kind of music I'm not particularly interested in. There seems something soothing about my brain taking in information and seeing a kind of enigmatic view of the world.

**JT:** Do you do a lot of your writing in the morning then, or not?

**Pinsky:** I probably do, but it's my vanity not to think about my habits. I find it quite unpredictable when I will write or where I will write. If there were a constant, it would be that when there's too much to do or it's inconvenient to write, I'm slightly more likely to write. And if I'm alone in a lovely house out in the woods with a lot of peace and quiet I'm slightly less likely to write. I'm likely to get restless and want to turn on the TV.

**JT:** You need to have that difficulty?

**Pinsky:** Yes. I like difficulty and unlikelihood. If it is really unlikely to write, then for me it becomes more likely that I'll write. I like to sneak it in.

**JT:** I gather from some of your poems that you like to play poker. Is there any way in which poker is like writing? Or are those just two of the things you love?

**Pinsky:** Well, the study of character and behavior is definitely a part of poker. You could make an analogy with poetry in that on the one hand there are the cards, a cold set of odds, chance, and then on the other there is human behavior. In poetry both chance and principle are involved. So you could say the mathematical nature of the game is like the rhythm of prosody.

**JT:** That's fun, that's an interesting way to think about writing poetry.

**Pinsky:** I must say though, playing the saxophone, is one of the few times I'm not thinking about writing. So I like both those activities. They are almost the only times I'm not thinking about writing.

**JT:** Some poets have described writing as like a long swim or a little journey. Is there a metaphor to it for you, is there a way in which it feels a certain way?

**Pinsky:** Writing for me is like noodling on a piano, or at its very best it's like playing a solo series of chord changes or a set of chord changes, if you'll accept that analogy.

**JT:** In the poem, "Ode to Meaning," you refer to meaning as both savior and sentencer. Could you talk a little bit about that?

**Pinsky:** I value meaning highly. Perhaps because I felt a certain dearth of it as a child. My mother had a head injury when I was a kid, and it produced a certain amount of chaos and disorder in the household for a number of years. It made me permanently conservative in certain ways, and meaning gave me a tremendous source of comfort and reassurance. But meaning can be terrifying as well, as when you open up the lab report of a medical doctor, or the test results of your state licensing exam, or hear the ring of a long-awaited phone call about a decision of some kind. To go back to our poker analogy, everybody puts their cards down and you get to see what you have.

**JT:** In your poetry is there sometimes a kind of struggle that's implied in the paradox of something being both "savior and sentencer"?

**Pinsky:** I think so. I think that in my particular psychology, there's a kind of Hindu belief in a circularity of things it's chronological. A equals A. It's always there. Things are deeply cyclical, and in a mysterious equilibrium. There's also a kind of panic and fear about that principle... that everything is not just boiled down to X equals X.

**JT:** It seems to me the most mysterious thing about a wonderful poem...

**Pinsky:** The way it's both... both at once?

**JT:** Yes. During the White House Millennium evening last year, you referred to our literary ancestors, which is so much of what the whole Favorite Poem Project is about. Who do you see as your literary ancestors?

**Pinsky:** My immediate ancestors are Wallace Stevens and T. S. Eliot and Robert Frost and Elizabeth Bishop and William Carlos Williams and William Butler Yeats. But my literary ancestors also include James Joyce, Nikolai Gogol and very much Thomas Campion and Thomas Nash and Fulke Greville and Walter Raleigh and Ben Jonson, George Herbert.

**JT:** Quite a lineage.

**Pinsky:** Yes, I've got some good ancestors!

**JT:** You've written about how we can hold a poem in case we need it... As a comforting thing to hold back fear. I understand that "Church Monuments" by George Herbert is such a poem for you?

**Pinsky:** Yes. It's partly the sureness of the syntax. I used to have a habit of reciting "Church Monuments" to myself and holding a picture of my loved ones in my mind when an airplane was taking off or landing, so that if the plane suddenly blew up I'd go out with "Church Monuments" and that visual image of my family in front of me. It's funny to find it comforting because it's all

about disillusion! Herbert's a master of it. He's exposing it in those brilliant sentences and across rhymes, and he has a good humor about it. The comfort in the physical sound of it. The comfort is in the way the sentences physically incorporate the pattern of the rhymes.

**JT:** Sometimes when you know a poem, so well, it's really more of a mantra and a chant, I think.

**Pinsky:** Yes. I was raised in an nominally orthodox household, till I managed to get out of the synagogue as soon as I could, because of the praying phonetically in a language, that I mostly didn't understand. I hated it, but there's a profound truth in it too.

**JT:** True for me in the Catholic Church, when it was still Latin.

**Pinsky:** It's just magic to your soul. Consonants and vowels pour out, and there's tremendous power in that. There is meaning there, but you're feeling the aura of it rather than the substance of it.

**JT:** True. And when you're not really afraid there's not that much that really can be said about it, but you can hold it.

**Pinsky:** Yes. It's like a teddy or or a blankee. It's just a physical comfort.

**JT:** A friend of mine who recently had to have an MRI and hates that confinement said, "I'll take my poem in there." You know... Take your poems with you wherever you have to...

**Pinsky:** Yes. I had a friend and former colleague, who was dying of lung cancer, and he began to write poems in the course of his illness, and when he had had difficult nights, said, he would take tremendous comfort, and reciting his own poems over to himself in his head from memory... That he had done them, and that he knew them gave him a definite comfort. Since I've started the Favorite Poem Project, people have told me about quite elderly people or people who've had strokes who suddenly spout many, many lines of poetry that nobody realized they know, even though they've forgotten who their own families are; they've forgotten their names. The poetry is there, but other things are scraped away or fall away.

**ME:** I have another kind of question. I was teaching rhythm and meter to a group of first year students, and we were looking at Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz." One student asked in all seriousness, "Doesn't this ruin poetry for you to figure out the meter?" How would you respond to that question?

**Pinsky:** I would say that a person who loves watches and machinery will take a watch apart, not because that's the main pleasure of the machinery, but because you learn a lot about it. Same with an animal. If you're a dog lover, and do a dissection, you learn a lot about dogs. But it's to learn about the living thing that you sometimes engage in analysis. You can analyze a great poem, a wonderful poem like "My Papa's Waltz," and yet you can step back from it and enjoy it. Someone who analyzes a basketball game or a football game can enhance the pleasure through the analysis, but also can step back and forget the analysis and enjoy the pleasure of the spectacle. I think that the pleasure of the spectacle is enhanced, the physical experience is enhanced, by the experience of the analysis. I assume that if an NBA coach or an experienced

player watches an NBA game, they'll get a lot of pleasures that are not available to me because I can't see what they see. They can break down its components. Same with food. The person who really understands the dish and preparation of it will have pleasures that I don't have. Yet I don't think that my naivete gives me a significant pleasure that's unavailable to the experienced person who knows a lot about basketball or food. I don't think there's any fall from grace involved in learning a lot about basketball or cuisine.

**ME:** There's a deepening of your understanding.

**Pinsky:** Yes, I think you have all of the intuitive pleasures, and you add understanding to them.

**JT:** But the primary response is not there, then...

**Pinsky:** ...no point in analysis.

**ME:** Some people are uncomfortable with what they see as an elitist notion that some poems are great while other poems are terrible. So what's your view about value judgments?

**Pinsky:** Elitism is a social term. Elitism says they are chosen. Literally it means "the elected." There are people who are chosen and who are better because they are chosen. It has to do with social attitudes. It doesn't have to do with the standard of normative values altogether. Some people will prefer a Taurus to a BMW. A BMW costs more, and it costs more because people who know a lot about these things have decided they've put more valuable things into it. Subjectively someone might say, "I just like the Taurus better." there's no question that the Taurus is better for that person. But there's a reason that the BMW costs more. There's a reason that "Sailing to Byzantium" has the equivalent of a higher price tag on it.

**ME:** That's a great analogy, but why is "Sailing to Byzantium" [by William Butler Yeats] a great poem? What are some of the characteristics of a great poem for you?

**Pinsky:** Well, it is a great poem because it's on a great subject, which is art as a source of value and a source of spiritual aspiration, even if immortality, supplanting Christian and other religious notions of spiritual value and immortality. Art is one of the great themes. It's a distinguished poem, because it is so free of the expected. For example, the use of the word nature... "once out of nature, I shall never take my bodily form from any natural thing." It's just the opposite of a cliché. It's a use of the word nature, unlike that the readers storehouse of expectations and habit could supply. Almost in every moment of the poem, something that distinguished is happening... "those dying generations" ... to call the birds and the fish "those dying generations!" It's not like a successful song or something you've thought many times is put into very distinguished and very artful phrases that are close to what you've said many times, just a little bit better.

**ME:** The element of surprise maybe...

**Pinsky:** The element of distinction. It's immensely distinguished; that is what makes it good. And it's about something immensely important and that is what makes it great.

**ME:** Your career spans enormous changes in technology. Would you talk about the differences in writing poems with pen on paper or typing them on a typewriter versus composing them on a computer?

**Pinsky:** There is absolutely no difference in writing a poem with a pen or a pencil or composing it on a computer, because if you're doing it the right way you're writing with your voice anyhow. There might be a slight more efficiency and convenience in printing it out, but basically your tool is your voice. Your instrument is your voice. The form of notation is a matter of convenience.

**ME:** You're seeing the pen or the computer keyboard as the technology but the medium...

**Pinsky:** They're secondary technologies, that's right. But your main medium, your main technique is spoken.

**ME:** if you were conducting an interview with a poet laureate, say your predecessor, Robert Haas, what's one question you would want to ask?

**Pinsky:** I would ask him what program he would have, or what advice he would have for people planning a curriculum that was going to include poetry. I'd ask him about education. I'd ask him what he would say to a lot of administrators and legislators about allotting resources to art... to the arts in general.

**JT:** That reminds me of a question I wanted to ask you. This actually comes from my daughter-in-law who teaches fourth grade. I asked her the other day, "What do you think your fourth graders would want to ask the Poet Laureate?" and she said, "Well, they of course would want to know what rhymes with orange!" But she wanted me to ask you what advice you would give to an elementary school teacher.

**Pinsky:** Teach things that you love and you find appealing and you think are very, very good. Teach things you think are wonderful. That's a more important consideration than something you think is suitable for them or right for their level. The truth is, if you really think it's great you can read almost anything to the kids. And if you don't think it's very good, it's not going to work very well. That's the first piece of advice. Teach things you love. The second thing would be to read aloud to them and encourage them to read aloud to one another.

**JT:** Great.

**ME:** What does the future of poetry look like for the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

**Pinsky:** I'm not very good at thinking about trends and tendencies. I think almost by definition an artist wants to do not what's in fashion, or what's coming, or what's going to happen next, but instead thinks in terms of substantive work, what one's going to accomplish oneself. I wouldn't be surprised if the role of poetry became even more visible. I would assume that that increased visibility will increase the popularity of poems that I like very much, and of poems that I have anything ranging from benign contempt to disgust for as well. But you can't say, "Well, let's have poetry be very popular, and have everybody like it," and then say, "Of course, you can only like the things that I like!"

Endnote: interviewed by Mark Eaton and Jane Vincent Taylor in 1999.

## ABC

Any body can die, evidently. Few  
Go happily, irradiating joy,

Knowledge, love. Many  
Need oblivion, painkillers,  
Quickest respite.

Sweet time unafflicted,  
Various world:

X = your zenith.

## **If You Could Write One Great Poem, What Would You Want It to Be About?**

*(Asked of four student poets at the Illinois  
Schools for the Deaf and Visually Impaired)*

Fire: because it is quick, and can destroy.

Music: place where anger has its place.

Romantic Love—the cold or stupid ask why.

Sign: that it is a language, full of grace,

That it is visible, invisible, dark and clear,

That it is loud and noiseless and is contained

Inside a body and explodes in air

Out of a body to conquer from the mind.

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