

Poetry, Miracles, and the Path to the Beloved Community

A Talk in Six Parts

by Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

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Part 1: The Path and the Beloved Community

The Path to the Beloved

The path is the path: littered with seeds and leaves
from just before one beloved died or another
found you. The rocks here are heavy and take
multiple humans exerting heat and force to shift.
The branches are so blossom-weighted that they
scratch your tender face if you turn too quickly.
The beloveds wind thread-wide tunnels of life
below ground, or roost in the the cedars of memory
and future. Everything, everyone you have the possibility
to love makes and follows a previously-unflappable
path, rife with swirls and switchbacks, bramble too
engaged with itself to open, and sudden clearings.
Where did you think you were going anyway?

Home is as still as the eye of cardinal, balancing
on the thinnest cottonwood branch just burst into
leaf and daring. Home is the next step into the next story.
Home is the bend in the river at dusk, the mid-afternoon
waking on the porch while bird song criss-crosses
the damp air, the pounding rain, the return of sunlight.
Home twines your path with mine, branching out
beneath the bowl of stars to show us how
we changed into who we always were.
~ Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

“Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives,” Martin Luther King, Jr. said. In naming the racial divides that catalyze injustice, violence, and fragmentation – brokennesses that hurts us still – he called on us to grow the deepest reaches of our individual souls and widest embrace of our collective lives. In considering what Dr. King said about the beloved community and our conference's theme on word-paths, I've been exploring how the miracle of poetry can help us make and keep the beloved community, in which we can do the hard work of reconciliation: to bring into the fold diverse voices and visions without losing our own.

Our path and our people come to us when we go to ground: engage with what's really here. Poet and writer Wendell Berry explains, “The difference between a path and a road is not only the obvious one. A path is little more than a habit that comes with knowledge of a place. It is a sort of

ritual...through experience and familiarity, of movement to place; it obeys the natural contours.” The path shows us how to seek and keep, release and begin again, break our hearts open, and deepen our best thinking so that we can contribute to, as Dr. King says, “a reconciled world by raising the level of relationships among people to a height where justice prevails and persons attain their full human potential.”

And poetry? All of us here know how a line, a rhythm, an image, and even more so, the practice of reading and writing can catalyze a qualitative change in our souls toward greater peripheral vision that erases some of our previous ways of limiting ourselves. “I learn by going where I have to go,” Theodore Roethke writes in “The Waking.” Poetry is the phone line between the surface of our lives and our deepest callings, a lifelong conversation full of confusion, clarity, trespasses through fear or delight, and a whole lot of divining for water with some sticks out in the wilderness. It's our flashlight in the dark woods, showing us where and how to step next.

Part 2: Finding My Path and People

Like many of you, I was a weird little kid. Growing up in Brooklyn and New Jersey with too many show tunes, a dysfunctional family with too much hitting and slapping, and little grasp of social cues didn't help. Yet all my life something has compelled me from within to connect with what's without: the true north of community, whether with other humans, animals, and the changing weather patterns that sweep through the land, turning the tree outside my childhood window into a force of such beauty and life that it electrified me. “Beauty is life, life, beauty – that's all ye know to know,” as Keats put it – didn't translate into being able to connect with humans, at least not easily and not for a long time. As I wrote in my poetry collection *Animals in the House*:

Girl

When I was a girl I didn't know
I was a girl. I thought I was
more of a pigment, a choral tone,
some kind of weather that disrupts
everyone's life in the living room.
I knocked over the cast iron iron again,
and this time it broke. *How could
you break an iron iron?* they yelled,
but how could I not? The weight of
metal on the earth, wanting to return.
When money was missing, I thought surely
I must have taken it.
When it rained, a hurricane this time,
I thought, *see what you've done now.*
I didn't believe in cause and effect, elements of
surprise, or the slim chance meetings
that changed everyone's lives. I didn't know
that people were supposed to end,
contained as vases to hold
whatever you gave them.

I thought we were more like land, islands even,

unfurling slowly in the brown
haze of the sea. I thought there was water
everywhere, pouring us into changeable
shapes – leaf or puppy or branch. All falling
toward wherever it came from
not afraid or surprised,
not bad or tricked into good.

All falling back into the horizons that come
each evening to meet the fire.

I found my fire in art, and horizons in the real horizons of this planet. I thrived because of the wind and trees, the two sources that I was sure God lived in, a sketch pad, a piano to pound on for hours, and the stories that my teachers labeled daydreaming.

I didn't begin to glimpse my people until high school when, in the middle of a domestic war that ripped through my extended family, I sat on the stoop outside my dad's girlfriend's apartment building and wrote a poem, each line a lifeline. I was 14 and needed words, and words didn't disappoint, giving me a quiet place to tuck myself into a hammock made of images, rocked by rhythm. Thanks to a teacher, just a little older than the teens she taught, willing to catch me along with some other lost girls in a poetry group, I found my path and people, which included a whole lot of living and dead poets. I raced into the once-forbidden teacher's lounge each lunch time to show Ms. Rance-Roney my new poem in exchange for her handing me T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* or e.e. cummings' "i carry your heart with me." I walked the suburban highways of New Jersey reciting Elizabeth Barret Brownings' sonnets on my way to our local bookstore to find Langston Hughes, Denise Levertov, bad girl Muriel Rukeyser, and bad boy Allen Ginsburg. Ancient as 200-year-old oak trees and fresh as thunderstorms, poets just like or totally different from me were my traveling companions over the years: William Stafford, Sharon Olds, Adrienne Rich, W.S. Merwin, and Rumi.

Needing to find my own way, I went west, believing I had to make a living in journalism if I loved writing. So I got on a plane in a blizzard and let it aim me toward Missouri, not sure where it was but sensing I was being led where I needed to go. I wrote about that moment of descending toward the new land in my novel *The Divorce Girl*, in which the main character, a little like me, but much smarter and taller, says,

Amidst the stars, suspended as if we were sailing through them, hung the moon in its old circle of cloud. As a child I had watched this same moon as it hovered steadily, the light around it a ring of pink fading into blue. Maybe I had noticed this very scene all my life, yet this beauty was what made me pick up my camera again and again. But now, for the first time, I was in the scene. And no matter how far I flew, the moon remained the same distance away, like a god who actually loves us from afar, or like love made visible—a darkness that the light shines on, a darkness ringed with color.

I watched carefully even as the plane pointed its nose downward, to where I could see below the lights of the next life.

What my main character was looking toward was the path itself, contoured along the lines of the real world unfolding before her even if she couldn't see where it was leading. What I found was the love of my life: Kansas claimed me on a spring night in 1982 just hours before I met some of the people, including my husband, who would become my beloved community. Moving to Lawrence,

where the University of Kansas was, I went, very much like a lemming off the cliff, to graduate school without knowing why I was doing this, but compelled by a calling that wouldn't quit me. Over the next nine years, I gave birth to three children, and two graduate degrees while continually questioning where I was drawn in between excessive bouts of learning by going where I had to go.

The thread was always poetry. The ground was always the beloved community, which grew in surprising ways, showing me where to step next.

3. Walking the Path Together

Jonah and the Tree

You don't say you love that tree but you do.
Are you like this with anything
that gives you food or shade?
Oh, all of you get more rattled
at the sound of my voice in your satiny throats
because you're afraid of how stupid you'll look.

But I come to tell you
compassion always looks stupid
to those well-fed in a shady spot
while time bakes the earth.

Love looks stupid, too
as if the lover had no more sense
than to fling herself into the blank sky
she would soon fall out
like you, Jonah, back to the land
where a tree may mean all
because it makes you the god of it.

But if you lay there long enough
in the rain, you will remember how
the wet ground stretches itself open,
makes earth and sky the inside of a whale,
night unrolling into day,
day unrolling into night
in its old migration
back to me.

Once you can have gone so far,
how can you not let others return?
~ Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg, from *Animals in the House*

The further we go, the more we can help others find their way. In writing together, we can return to the real story we're meant to live instead of the stories projected upon us. Facilitating this work, for most of us, was one of those calls we couldn't ignore. Like many of you, I found that writing in my journal turned out to be a career path. I started facilitating community writing workshops 23

years ago, and began learning from my students how essential is that we write together.

For eight years, I facilitated workshops at local housing authority for women of color, all recovering from abuse, addiction, extreme poverty, lack of education and opportunity, and little sense of their own worth. They came, sometimes shaky because of a new med or a boyfriend arrested for sexually abusing their daughters, sometimes scared of what they would say or whether they could spell their best words, sometimes thrilled to get a break from the kids or grandkids they were raising. In *Transformative Language Arts in Action* co-edited with my Goddard colleague Ruth Farmer, which Kay Adams was series editor for, here is something I wrote about that housing authority group:

The circle around the table turned into a crescent of women on stage facing an audience of over 200 people at the Lawrence Arts Center on September 12, 2006. Our anthology, *A Circle of Women, a Circle of Words*, was just published.... None of us on stage, because of the lighting, could see the audience, but we heard their laughter and felt their attention as they listened. Mickey (diagnosed with severe schizophrenia), in a suit jacket, dress pants, and a silk shirt, couldn't stop smiling. Juliana wrapped herself and her considerable hair in purple African cloth from her Nigerian homeland. Ella (previously the quietest woman we knew who also knew dire poverty, illness and abuse) wore her best church dress, and while she looked down as she read, she kept grinning. Marilyn (a Lakota woman who lost her dreams because of illness) took the mic with ease when it was her turn, and read:

My heart takes up its task again when I open my eyes in the morning from yet another series of dreams my consciousness is left to decipher.... I don't like it when my minds get in the way of my melting heart, my joyful heart, my struggling to grasp the deeper meaning heart, my bleeding heart, and oh my brave strong heart so wanting to cover us all....

This was one of the first and only times in our community that women of public housing had their say. The mostly middle-class audience, including city commissioners and various movers and shakers of our town, mingled easily with the expansive friends and family of the women. Juliana brought everyone she's related to, and other women, almost everyone they knew.

After the reading, the women waited in a line with me to shake hands and sign books. "It's like a wedding," I whispered to them.

"It's better than my wedding," one of the women told me.

"It's the best night of my life," says another, then another, and another.

Flo Laducer, a native American woman who, after getting pregnant as a teen, ended up homeless, reflected on the workshop, telling me:

It's been over ten years since I sat in a room and wrote creatively with other women. It all started in a little red building in a public housing complex and each memory plays through my mind like an old movie reel. It is in that room where I learned to love myself a bit more. It is in that room where my mind expanded beyond my day to day living of an impoverished life. Surrounded by woman who could see that we needed something to pull us through...to pull me through the hard times one is either born into or suffering by circumstance....Now one could argue that it was merely a creative writing class and you would be right, but what is teaching creative writing but teaching creative thought? And from imagination springs dreams. I still hear the remarks of how touching my words are but my true love came from those evening with those women. I have fallen in love with the written word, and because of my love I have been working towards a degree as a Lab Scientist....I now own my own home on a little piece of

dirt with mountainous views that still stun me when my eyes gaze upon them. You can change your whole life if you picture it differently.

Workshop participants needed to write their lives to picture their lives anew, something I also found true for many of my students at Goddard College, where I began teaching in 1996. Telling their stories, understanding the symbols and myths that held sway over them, was instrumental to their studies. This understanding, coupled with the realization that I could make a living in Kansas, not known (especially lately) for support of the arts just through writing workshops, led me to found the Transformative Language Arts degree at Goddard, and with others, co-create this emerging academic field, profession, and calling.

When I attended my first NAPT, just as we were launching the Goddard program, I discovered all of you dreaming the same dream I was although we might call that dream by different names. I also found other relations in Narrative Therapy, Drama Therapy, Social Change Theatre, Playback Theatre, Healing Storytelling, and more. We could call much of this expressive arts therapies, but it's far more than just expression, art and therapy. What we're healing from, struggling through, or reckoning with didn't get that way in a vacuum. What's messed up in our economy, history, politics, social and class structure, and educational, medical and religious institutions trickles down to our households, families and selves. Our wounds and the ground our paths traverse are part and parcel of the same world.

Transformative Language Arts looked at the big questions about how and why so much is so screwed up as well as the big potential in ourselves and in our communities for change, health, growth and liberation. TLA now encompasses the MA program, a non-profit organization, an annual conference, introductory certification and classes, two books, and other projects. TLAers lead workshops, coach and consult, collaborate with arts, community and ecological programs, tell stories and sing songs, work alone or with crowds of others. In writing "Why I'm a Transformative Language Artist" for the *Huffington Post*, here's some of what I said:

I'm a transformative language artist because, like so many others I know, reading and writing have saved my life. I've seen what difference it makes for a 50ish Vermont woman to write her story of having a happy life after childhood sexual abuse.

I've witnessed how a lonely man in west Texas, who could hardly ever stop talking enough to let people in, found his people by leading storytelling workshops in his community's nursing home, where he was lucky to get a word in edgewise.

I've seen the damage done when people don't have good witnesses for their dreams and experiences, witnesses who help them feel the weight of their own words, and the strength of their own syllables.

I've seen how coming together to tell our stories makes its own synergy and community, even among unlikely bedfellows, like the workshop I facilitated in a small Kansas town for "at-risk" and "troubled teens" coupled up with elderly women at a well-heeled retirement center. By the third week of writing together, the girls -- mostly abandoned by their mothers who favored drugs or abusive boyfriends instead of their daughters -- were sitting in the laps of the older women, reading their new poems aloud.

I'm a transformative language artist because writing just for the art of it isn't enough, and neither is writing in one genre, working with just one group of people or for one narrow cause, or

occupying one traditional profession. What brings me alive also turns out to be what brings so many others alive: making something that speaks of and for us at the same time we make community, we make change, and we make meaning out of the broken and beautiful world.

4. The Mythic Path

I didn't understand why I was drawn to myths, fairy tales, folktales and biblical stories all my life until, teaching at the college level and leading community writing groups, I saw how much we're all struggling with the big overlapping and sheltering stories of who we were supposed to be. After all, myths, according to Roland Barthes, are a "dominant cultural narrative," or as I like to think of it, humongous stories that shape our options and infuse our inclinations for work, love, community, sense of self, and spirituality. When we write our own lives into our own truth, we're messing around in the control room of myth, evaluating what we're supposed to be, celebrating the stories that sing of our spirit, tossing out the tales that limit, silence or vanish us.

Lot's Wife, my first poetry book, explores other angles of myths, fairy tales and folktales. Here's a poem based on Hagar of the old testament, banished to the wilderness after having Abraham's son:

Hagar on the Mountain

I climb to the sound
of javelinas eating cactus.
In the path a kit fox stops,
looks up, afraid I would try
to touch. I bend slowly
to lower our son to the rocks.
No fox. Microscopic insects
sleep in my sweat.

The boy wakes and asks why
we do not build a fire big enough
for Abraham to find us.
I lift him and let his head
weigh against the bone
of my shoulder. At the top field
wind rises. Our voices rust
in the thinning air.

I will carry him all night
if I must, my son's whisper songs
telling me how the water
falls over the side of rock,
my hand on his forearm,
promising something.

A place to stop, a well
surrounded by animals
where we'll learn to dream God's dream
like all the others.

Through the cleansing winds and wild curves of poetry, exploring how poetic language can help us revise the story we're given so that we can speak with our whole voice, we can re-vision, a term poet Adrienne Rich illuminates, our lives by breaking silences and cultivating liberation for ourselves and others. In essence, epistemology – how we know what we know – is so often wound around myth. Through poetry, we construct knowledge – how we make meaning from heartbreak, lift up greater strength through betrayal, or plant resilience in fields that once were weeded with abandonment.

5. The Healing Path

At moments of great pain, illness and loss, we live out, in the most visceral way possible, both “the qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives,” learning how to reconcile the story we thought we were living with the story we're now, often without our consent, living. Community doesn't just help with the practicalities of serious ruptures in our physical and mental health – casseroles, picking up prescriptions, doing laundry or childcare, listening and hold our hands – but also with crafting our healing stories and symbols. From the middle of cancer land, and from my memoir *The Sky Begins At Your Feet*, here is a drop of water in that lake.

Days later, as I waited in the well-appointed waiting room of my surgeon – aptly named Dr. Jew, I couldn't stop worrying. The lamp shone just so on my magazine, now lying open to an article on how to cleverly create better storage in the home office. I couldn't read it; I was more focused on whether the chemo would permanently harm me, and how it was that something so poisonous would help me. For days, all I knew was that I knew nothing, not even how I would feel hour by hour, when the terror might come and kidnap me onto a road trip of despair and concern, when the calm that all would be okay would unfurl in my being, when I would be able to sleep or eat. Normal life seemed like a fictional entity when there was a toxic site in my body. What exactly did I house and carry?

Outside the cottonwoods shimmered. A forest of them gathered on the banks of the creek near the hospital, dotting the garden, and lining the many roads between the hospital and our house where their leaves still glowed with the first flush of maturity.

I sat there, staring at layouts for remodeled bathrooms, and imagined the chemo as a dark forest I would have to cross beyond the actual cottonwoods, mostly at night, with occasional moonlight, starlight. Sudden clearings. Bramble. Unclear where the trails lay.

On the other side of this dark forest was the prairie and autumn with bright lanterns leading me toward them....Although I didn't know the way yet, I could see the lanterns held by my family, friends, the people I loved....through the trees, alone but looking over at me, accompanying me from just beyond the path.”

Over time, we also go from unbroken to broken. All you have to do is love, and you're in for it in this life. “What falls away is always/ and is near,” Roethke tells us in “The Waking,” naming how even loss is not what we think it is – not some intensive class we finish. Those we love and our grief never completely gone from us but changing over time. As I write about in a poem from my new collection, *Chasing Weather*:

Then It's Over

The blue breaks through
the setting clouds, an old fire,
while the field lays down

its colors for the night.
Sky tumbles over itself
day to night, tension to calm.
What we think happened,
and what no one but the wind saw--
all lost to the first falling star.
Nothing hurts for a moment.
Those you love shine
whether still here or long gone.
A wide darkness envelopes
the world, takes your hand,
and shows you where to stop
looking and where to start.

In poetry, we make space for the losses we couldn't imagine surviving, finding that what William Stafford said is true: "Language can do what it can't say." The arts can speak to us in ways vaster than status quo language and gestures. At the same time, all of us are living out multiple narratives at once: stories of our joys, sorrows, promises, legacies, and callings. Listening to one another's stories is one our most basic and enduring ways of trusting each other to find our own definitions of healing and resilience. When Stephen Locke, the storm chaser photographer I collaborated with on *Chasing Weather*, told me the story of how his son overdosed and died after descending into mental illness, I wrote this poem for him.

Supercell

for Stephen

Did you think your life was straight as this road,
something that could be time-lapsed into a predictable gait?
Do you try to map lightning, predict when
the thunderhead will pause and fold in on itself?
Have you pointed to a place in the clouds and said, "there"
just before it turned into somewhere else?
It is all nothing, then supercell, multiple strikes through
the clouds while the tips of the grass shimmer.
From the deep blue that narrates your life
comes the pouring upward of white curves and blossoms.
From the dark comes the thunder. Then the violet flash.
From the panorama of what you think you know
comes the collapse of sky, falling on you right now
whether you're watching the weather or not.
The world dissolves, reforms. What comes surprises,
motion moving all directions simultaneously, like the losses
you carry, talismans strung through your days, singing
of those you've loved deep as the blue framing the storm.
It rains for a moment in the field, in your heart,
then the weather stretches open its hand and says,
Here, this whole sky is for giving.

6. The Path Is Not Just Our Own

The Dreaming Land

I dream of spring, when the sky dampens
the seeds of gathering heat, the diving crow
aims toward what was just born, and
even the driveway gravel glitters in the stark
white light between storm and night.

I dream of the winter's black-and-white landscape
scribbled green, punctured by the maroon tip of root
in a field cleaned black with fire while
the cottonwoods unfurl their pale green hearts.

This land dreams sky, a shifting infusion
of shadow on cloud, despite the unreliability
of rain or clarity. The deer dream fawns.
The fawns dream flight as they walk the through-line
of the horizon. The horizon never stops dreaming,
its sleep a progression of filtering color through space.

The dream always dreams possibility
juxtaposed against decay, lightning, first
redbud blossom or starling feather stuck on a rooftop.
The rooftop dreams, belly up, to the sky,
its dream a song of shelter and risk.

The sky dreams light rolling away from dark,
dark rolling away from light, expansive as sorrow
that permeates the porous souls of everything
from weather to the dog left alone in the living room
while I step outside into the dizzy of bird call,
flocks pouring down onto branches
swollen with the hard dreams of blossom.
~ Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg, from *Landed*

The path isn't just our own, nor is it just the path we walk and make with others. The path is also the path: the earth we walk on where the sky always begins at our feet. We ourselves are the path: we're animal, spiritual, and our own most local address of the earth. We are composed of stardust and water, flesh and soul. We can be our best dream or worst nightmare, and for the earth, the latter is more often true in recent years and decades.

Right now, we are just at the start of environmental ruptures changing our lives. In this last season alone, there have been massive drought-related forest fires in Siberia, Chile experienced one of the deadliest floods in its long history, the Sierra Nevada snowpack that waters much of northern California only received 5% of its expected snow, we're losing 100-150 species each day, and pollinators are so threatened that even Monsanto has finally come to the table to talk about what to do to protect the bees. This is the earth where we live.

Yet right here, the dogwood are blossoming, the air is sweet, the creek is singing its thunder song, and we are in the ecstatic throes of spring. This is also where we live: in an unbearably sweet and wounded world with our deepest darkness and brightest light. Everything that houses and feeds us, nourishes our bodies and minds, comes from here. We are earth stewarding earth. As poets who often find the strength of our poems through sensory images – what we can see, touch, taste, smell and hear – the living earth fuels our best words. We are called to act for the other-than-human species, who are center, top and bottom of the beloved community, for all of our sake.

I think I was right about God in the trees and wind, “The force that through the green fuse drives the flowers,” according to Dylan Thomas. The holy is all around us, composing and composed by each breath we and all the other beings give and take. Mary Oliver reminds us that we don't have to know how to pray, just to pay attention this world in this moment. From *Chasing Weather*:

You Rise Up To Meet the Falling World

Whatever you lift to the sky, the sky covers:
middle-of-the-night exaggerations dissolve
to slivers of sadness on your pillow,
middle-of-life jolts compress the heavens
into one streak of sleet, thawing into softer ground.
Like the rain cycle that obscures the view,
you can lose your way on old ground or forget
the innate blue light in everything, ready again.
The surface of the tall grass spins in the breeze
it swirls into existence. The present twists down
to meet you each time you catch your foot.
Stars inform daylight or its absence.
We are made to catch the falling world,
just as the earth is shaped perfectly to catch us.

The sound of the beloved community runs through our lives. Let us end by turning to someone sitting near us, looking into their eyes, and reading together, as a beloved community, this poem by William Stafford:

Assurance

You will never be alone, you hear so deep
a sound when autumn comes. Yellow
pulls across the hills and thrums,
or the silence after lightning before it says
its names – and then the clouds' wide-mouthed
apologies. You were aimed from birth:
you will never be alone. Rain
will come, a gutter filled, an Amazon,
long aisles – you never heard so deep a sound,
moss on rock, and years. You turn your head –
that's what the silence meant: you're not alone.
The whole wide world pours down.

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg, Ph.D. is the founder of Transformative Language Arts, a master's program, at Goddard College, where she teaches. She's also the 2009-2013 Kansas Poet Laureate, and the author or editor of 19 books, including five collections of poetry (*Lot's Wife*, *Animals in the House*, *Landed*, *Reading the Body* and *Chasing Weather*; a collaboration with photographer Stephen Locke); the memoirs *The Sky Begins At Your Feet: A Memoir on Cancer, Community, and Coming Home to the Body*, and *Poem on the Range: A Poet Laureate's Love Song to Kansas*; a non-fiction book on the Holocaust, *Needle in the Bone: How a Holocaust Survivor and Polish Resistance Fighter Beat the Odds and Found Each Other*; and the novel, *The Divorce Girl*. She facilitates community writing workshops widely, particularly for adults in transition, and people living with serious illness. With Kelley Hunt, she co-writes songs, performs poetry and music, and offers Brave Voice retreats. She's certified in poetry therapy, yoga teaching, grassroots organizing, and group facilitation, and makes her home just south of Lawrence, Kansas on the prairie with her family.