

On Taking A Poem For A Walk

journal.workthatreconnects.org/2023/09/02/on-taking-a-poem-for-a-walk/

by Barbara Whitfield

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Recorded by author

One afternoon I was waiting for a friend who was late. I wasn't bothered; I was in a cafe overlooking the beach, and had the entire afternoon to dedicate to my friend, so what were a few minutes? Ordinarily, I would have spent the time reading, but some inner voice stopped me. Luckily, I listened.

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For a while, like many others, I had been struggling to find ways in which I could actively work to support nature in the face of humanity's unceasing onslaught. While all the habits I had formed as a matter of course—cycling, upcycling, recycling—gave me some sense of rebalancing, they equally felt inadequate. I felt powerless. How was I, one very flawed human, supposed to make a difference that felt transformative in general and meaningful personally? I couldn't even change the environment immediately outside my backdoor, let alone on a global level. It was easy to lose heart.

I live in a beautiful part of the world, surrounded by fields and hills and streams, a quick hop to the sea and yet, even here, the local community is facing polluted rivers, dying trees, and the loss of insects and birds. On a warm day when the sky is high, the spring's hum is missing. Apple trees that used to sing with bees as though vibrating as you passed are silent. Nature should not be silent. The meadow behind our house which used to fly upwards with wildflower-coloured butterflies is now more often a flat, unmoving green or worse, brown through lack of rain.

"What does nature need from me that feels hopeful?"

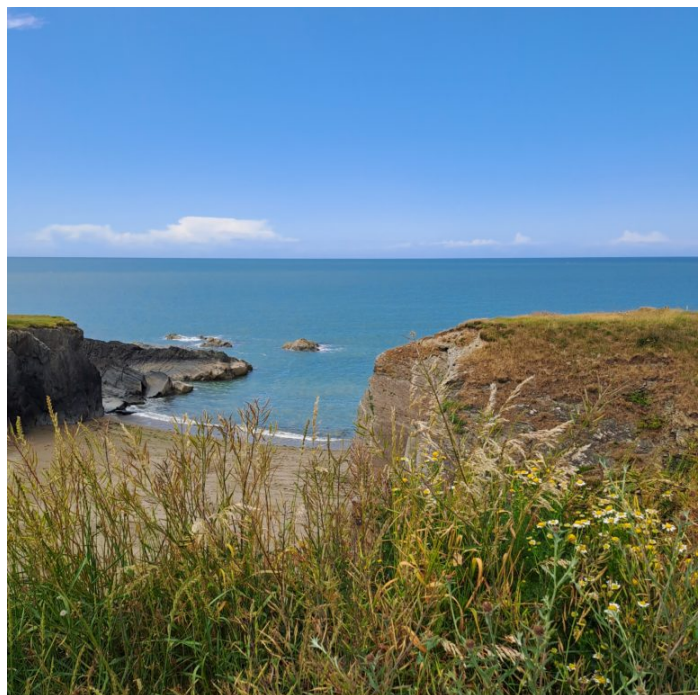


Photo by Barbara Whitfield

Over time, in seeking answers, I came to realise that I was asking the wrong question. What would it look like if, instead of asking “What can I do for nature that feels useful?” I were to ask, “What does nature need from me that feels hopeful?”

Often, help is given in the way we think is appropriate without considering the recipient’s needs. This is something I’ve observed both on a personal and community level and across the wider context of international aid and politics. Help is given top-down. While it may make us feel better about ourselves and we have sound motives, often our efforts have unintended consequences because we have paid scant attention to what the recipient is saying.

| *Take a poem for a walk.* What the hell did that mean?

So, with the luxury of those stolen minutes in a cafe by the sea, I decided to write down all the ways in which nature was asking for help and which I hadn’t tuned into. Using the back of a plant list I found in the bottom of my bag and begging a pen from the cafe owner, I covered the paper with what I hoped was nature’s voice. Some suggestions were practical—don’t take more than you need; replenish what you take. Some were big and vague—bear witness. One, which I didn’t remember writing down, struck and stuck. *Take a poem for a walk.* What the hell did that mean?

I hadn’t thought of poetry for decades, not since earnest teenagehood. But the idea would not be ignored. Where to start, though? How do you walk a poem? Why would you? Wouldn’t people think you were mad? Where would you even find poetry? I nearly gave into cynicism— that postmodern protection from our own cowardice—but I was compelled, or rather propelled, by a force outside my will.

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Over the next few weeks and months, the idea developed: I would choose or write a poem, walk somewhere that suited that poem, read the poem into nature and record it with voice and image to pass on. A key element of this practice is that it is carried out on behalf of others.

My first literal and figurative step came on a hoar-frosty morning here in West Wales just before Christmas. I was out of bed early and knew I had to walk up the hill behind our house and speak Christina Rossetti’s poem, *In the Bleak Midwinter*, into the clean, clear air. As I spoke those lines, it felt like a bird call, a breath out into nature, honouring the season, honouring giving and giving over. It was a small thing, a slight connection, but it was my thing. Something I could do. Anywhere, anytime. And it didn’t feel like a small thing at all. It echoed Rossetti’s words—Yet what I can I give...Give my heart.”

| I receive unexpected blessings in return

Since then, I have walked other poems for other people—some at moments of joy or gratitude, some at times of confusion or despair, once a Kaddish for a Jewish friend

whose father had recently died. People send me poems from all over the world and we wait, the poem and I. I never know which day and which place will instruct us. I wake up some mornings knowing that on that day I will walk here or there and release the words into nature. Once, Poe's *The Raven* took me on my first night walk, which scared me almost senseless, but which not only felt right but opened a different engagement with the world around me. And, for all this practice feels as though my energy is being called outwards, I receive unexpected blessings in return. I look more closely, I listen more intently, I travel to, and walk in, places I would not have done before. There is never a moment on these walks where I don't feel a deep sense of peace and gratitude and, even more deeply, a connection with the great everything.

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I've come to realise that what I am doing is not revolutionary, much as my ego would relish that. It is simply a reimagining of the tradition of mediaeval sin walkers who were paid to carry the burden of other's sins along the great pilgrim routes. I am not paid by the way. And it is a continuation of those who sing or leave art in wounded places to heal them. I am healing myself, those whose feelings I carry, and the land, water and air into which I speak the words of poets.

I have also discovered that poetry is infectious. Those who encounter this practice begin to notice poems left around them—it's there in the unlikeliest of places—and send poems that speak to them, to be breathed on their behalf into all creation. I've been on walks with friends who have said, "If you don't mind..." having brought a poem with them to read into the wild Welsh wind. Once on a crowded city street many miles from home, my dearest friend read a poem for *me* and for that moment we were united. Strangely, happily, no one passing found her recital odd. Usually, people pass by with a smile and so the poem's spirit moves along with them like an opportunistic plant on the pelt of an animal.

Taking a poem on a walk may not be for everyone or even anyone else. Asking for a poem to be walked and spoken into nature may not sound useful or even hopeful to many. But for me, this practice feels like a victory over complacency or despair and is joyful in the face of indifference or despondency. It connects the community of those who have requested a voice and myself with the resonance of all that is and can be. Hopefully, words spoken on the wind in the wild west of Wales play in the air far beyond these shores.



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Barbara Whitfield: I am currently living on a small holding in West Wales. I write and perform poetry and, with a partner, novels, plays and screenplays. Before moving to Wales, I was a researcher for the Oxford English Dictionary. Since moving, I have been a non-fiction editor for Parthian Books. I am currently developing a forest garden alongside other small-holding undertakings. I believe in an animate world where all things are equal and, thus, to be respected and protected. I have completed the Active Hope Foundations Training (<https://www.activehope.info/free-training>) and I am a member of the Walking Artists Network.

