

# HOLDING FAST TO H: RUMINATIONS ON THE ARTS PRECONFERENCE

# ABSTRACT:

When Susan, Barbara, Diane, and I began planning for the ARTS Preconference, we quickly decided that the event ought to be different from most conference gatherings. Early on, we suggested that the event ought to be a "happening." My main way of ruminating, investigating, and questioning is to write poetry. In the process of writing poetry I slow down and linger with memories, experiences, and emotions. In all my writing, I am seeking ways to live with wellness. In poetry I seek new ways of knowing and being and becoming. I write in order to invite conversation about what it means to be human on the earth in the twenty-first century. I write with the hope that others will share their stories, too. I write with the anticipation that we will discover together how to make difficult and critical decisions for living, the kind of decisions that will sustain the ecology of our countless interconnections with all the sentient and non-sentient creation. I write poetry and essays as a way to hold out my hands in both gratitude and invitation, always seeking to make connections, as we learn always to live with courage, spirit, and creativity.



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Like bpNichol, the Canadian writer, poet, and editor, one of my favourite letters of the Lalphabet is H. After bpNichol died at the age of forty-four, George Bowering and Michael Ondaatje (1994) edited a collection of Nichol's writing titled *An H in the heart: bpNichol: A reader*. It remains one of my favourite collections of poetry. I especially like the notion of "an Hin the heart." When Susan, Barbara, Diane, and I began planning for the ARTS Preconference, we quickly decided that the event ought to be different from most conference gatherings. Early on, we suggested that the event ought to be a "happening." Barbara recommended that we read Susan Sontag's (1966) "Happenings: An art of radical juxtaposition" where Sontag explains:

There has appeared in New York recently a new, and still esoteric, genre of spectacle. At first sight apparently a cross between art exhibit and theatrical performance, these events have been given the modest and somewhat teasing name of 'Happenings.' (n.p.)

I have known Susan, Barbara, and Diane for a long time, and I have learned to trust them with my whole heart and imagination. So, when we began discussing a preconference like a "happening," I was enthused with the promise of creating an event that would be different from most conference experiences. I know how Susan, Barbara, and Diane always live with courage, spirit, and creativity. I have learned from them in countless ways, and I was eager to continue learning, as in the following poem:

# Perplexing Pedagogy: Pensées

if lost in mystery something emerges

a time you learned something almost always begins with letting go

at the end of the day, writing is about desire the heart, breathing and not breathing

I will learn to live attentively in tentative times I will learn to live the tenuous in tensile times

under the sky where possibilities defy calculus I am a radical rooted in earth, heart, and wind

I attend to the familiar with unfamiliar words I attend to the unfamiliar with familiar words

if we don't see the value in our lived stories we won't see the value in others' stories

seek words infused with the heart's rhythms efficacious, capacious, effervescent words

I come alive in my writing where I see, hear, know promises

no day is complete without reading and writing poetry!

I am in process I am content

I will shape my rumination about the ARTS Preconference around a series of H words, holding the H in the heart, inviting you to hold the H in your hearts.

# The first H-word is: Hole

A while ago, Erika Hasebe-Ludt invited me to walk with her in the neighbourhood of Triumph Street in Vancouver where Ted T. Aoki lived for a while during his adolescence. I met Erika in the neighbourhood, and we walked to the site of the Aoki house. Ted's father ran a language school in the building, and the family lived in the house. When we arrived, we were surprised to find a hole. An excavation team had destroyed the building and dug a big hole in order to prepare for the expansion of the craft brewery that is next door. So, while we anticipated seeing the home where Ted T. Aoki and his family once lived, we found instead a big hole. We were reminded how we still feel a hole in our hearts because Ted is no longer with us.

# Vowels (for Ted T. Aoki)

with Ted I walk in the moment, a tangled line of metonymic moments, making the momentous story where moments are still and eternal

always in motion, he lingers long in locations where he stands steady, sturdy, in the dizzy, always shape-shifting landscape of holes like a floating archipelago, best navigated by memory, and faith in the mysteries of the alphabet

in his words I am rendered pneumatic, with feet dangling in both the earth and the heart's imagining of poetic possibilities, still waiting for names

he holds the vowels that breathe life in our consonants, constantly ready to know the *I* in our writing, the metonymic wildness of *I* 

he knows the messy texture of lived experiences, and follows the line of discipline to know the oblique, porous, capacious line that is no line



Ted lives in language, and language lives in Ted, drawing us to see what we overlook, focuses attention on tension, both tending and attending, throwing out lines, here and there, enamoured with the fecundity of conjunctions

reminds us that grammar, the letter, the law are chimerical, even comical, like an alchemist of gramarye, transforms stone and water into pigments for re-presenting the world in words, always both familiar and unfamiliar, a seer who teaches us to see

with Ted I walk in the moment, a tangled line of metonymic moments, making the momentous story where moments are still and eternal

# The second H-word is: Hope

Like Herbert Kohl (1998), I am a hope-mongerer. After being diagnosed with cancer, my brother Rick died last summer. He was 62 years old. I wrote a paper titled "The faces of love: The curriculum of loss." One peer reviewer wrote that the paper was "sentimental and self-indulgent." How could it be any thing else? We shouldn't write about personal experiences!? Years ago, I read Jane Tompkins' (1987) "Me and my shadow," and her essay changed my life. Tompkins writes:

Well, I'm tired of the conventions that keep discussions of epistemology, or James Joyce, segregated from meditations on what is happening outside my window or inside my heart. The public-private dichotomy, which is to say the public-private hierarchy, is a founding condition of female oppression. I say to hell with it. The reason I feel embarrassed at my own attempts to speak personally in a professional context is that I have been conditioned to feel that way. That's all there is to it. (p. 169)

Inspired by Tompkins, I have collaborated with women all my academic life. In recent years I have worked with many women who are promoting health and education for women with incarceration experience. In 2014, Ruth Martin, Mo Korchinski, Lynn Fels, and I co-edited *Arresting hope: Women taking action in prison health inside out*. We are currently completing a companion book titled *Releasing hope: Women's stories of transition from prison to commu*-



*nity*. As women were released from prison, they were asked, "What would you like people to know that would be helpful for women being released?" I composed the following two found poems out of their responses.

We're Human

We're all human We're only human

We aren't bad people We just made mistakes

We all make mistakes We just made bad choices

We are trying to change We deserve a second chance

We need help getting back on our feet We deserve a chance to get things right

We are broken, struggling, wounded We can be fixed with love and support

And they were asked, "What are you feeling most hopeful about?"

# I Am Hopeful About

everything:

changing being free being happy finding a job being a mom losing weight going to college doing things right getting on my feet getting healthy again beginning a new life getting my life on track having a life without drugs learning more about spirituality working things out with my family



moving forward with my life putting my record behind me regaining my husband's trust keeping my shit together maintaining a steady life staying out of jail living a good life taking care of me supporting peers taking initiative being content staying clean

everything:

## The third H-Word is: Heart

The human heart beats anywhere from fifty to one hundred times per minute. On average, the human heart beats seventy-two times in a minute. My goal is to help generate a conversation. I am not trying to convince anyone about anything. I am the host of a gathering who invites others. I am promoting connections between poetic knowing and research in the social sciences. I am promoting a poetics of research by promoting poetic ways of knowing. I extend an invitation to readers to listen for the call, to hear their hearts, to hear the hearts of others beating with poetic rhythms.

My main way of ruminating, investigating, and questioning is to write poetry. In the process of writing poetry I slow down and linger with memories, experiences, and emotions. In all my writing, I am seeking ways to live with wellness. We need poetry because poets engage with Ted T. Aoki's (1993/2005) "playful singing in the midst of life" (p. 282). Poets are always attending to the alphabet, grammar, spelling, music, and imagery, as well as the keen intersections of the mind, heart, imagination, and memory. As Jane Hirshfield (1997) claims, poetry brings "new spiritual and emotional and ethical understandings, new ways of seeing, new tools of knowledge" (p. 79). In poetry I seek new ways of knowing and being and becoming.

According to Mary Oliver (1994), "poetry is one of the ancient arts, and it began, as did all the fine arts, within the original wilderness of the earth" (p. 106). I write poetry because I need to know I am connected to the earth. As Oliver understands, poetry "began through the process of seeing, and feeling, and hearing, and smelling, and touching, and then remembering—I mean *remembering in words*—what these perceptual experiences were like" (p. 106). The poet's calling is "to describe the endless invisible fears and desires of our inner lives" (p. 106). As a poet I am always attending to experiences, and I am always seeking to translate and interpret the experiences in ways that help me live with wellness in the world.

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twenty-first century. I write with the hope that others will share their stories, too. I write with the anticipation that we will discover together how to make difficult and critical decisions for living, the kind of decisions that will sustain the ecology of our countless interconnections with all the sentient and non-sentient creation. I write poetry and essays as a way to hold out my hands in both gratitude and invitation, always seeking to make connections.

Mary Oliver is my favourite poet. When she died with lymphoma on January 17, 2019, at the age of 83 years, I knew that no poet has ever touched me more. She has both shaken and stirred my spirit and imagination. No other poet has ever spoken in the ways that she has spoken. I have been reading and citing Mary Oliver for many years. I am glad that Mary Oliver lived till 83, and that she continued to write her wonderful poetry until the end. I, too, am living with lymphoma. Right now, I dwell daily in the space between living and dying, and poetry holds me fast. Matthew Zapruder (2017) claims that "maybe poems are not to be read for their great answers, but for their great, more often than not unanswerable, questions" (p. 107). I draw this rumination to a close with a final poem composed of fragments that are hopefully inviting and open-ended. I am always seeking a "happening" in my poetry. I am less concerned about being successful than I am about trusting the process. Susan, Barbara, Diane, and I trusted the process of planning the ARTS Preconference, and the happening that emerged on that delightfully memorable Saturday will remain with us as a celebration of many H words, including hole, hope, and heart. As Mary Oliver (1992) once wrote: "We hope for magic; mystery endures" (p. 240).

# Apples

1

my granddaughters all love apples

Ambrosia Autumn Gold Braeburn Cripps Fuji Gala Granny Smith Grove Gravenstein Honeycrisp Jazz McIntosh Nicola Pink Lady Red Delicious Spartan Sunrise Tuscan

they don't need names

they love all apples

I hope they write poetry



what would the world be like if poets departed with their poetry?

3

poets seek creative living at least some poets some of the time

4

how can poetry speak about poverty?

5

poems suffused with enough wisdom to shape a whole life, full of wonder

6

I look for poets on TV, & in newspapers, Hollywood films, and airport bookstores

where are the poets?

7

poetry is a spiritual practice akin to prayer, contemplation, meditation, and silence

8

is anyone reading books any more? or are we just buying books and pretending we have read them? what books?

100,000 books are published in English every year

reading 100 books a year, I'll never catch up

time to focus on poetry

9

what might happen if more men



read and wrote and shared poetry?

10

one day a week I will enjoy the peace of a Sabbath an ancient poetic rhythm as old as creation

## 11

what if we embraced the poet's penchant for questions, and challenged the chimera of answers?

## 12

when refracted in a hopeful light, everything is poetry

#### 13

what might it be like to live every day filled with poetry and poetic possibilities?

#### 14

Saturday morning is a poetic space for remembering the week that has been and imagining the week that might be

## 15

poetry is a way of leaning into the world with enthusiasm possessed by words

## 16

poets cannot be polite

poets must be political

## 17

like poetry grammar is a magical evocation of hopeful possibilities



#### 18

no day is complete without reading and writing poetry

#### 19

how is grammar connected to glamour, magic, alchemy, spells and spelling?

can any of us live without grammar and the spell of poetry?

20

as a poet I contemplate the mysteries of creation & why I ate the twenty meatball dinner at IKEA last night

## 21

I will be on vacation in Mexico from April 3 to 17

I will be reading fiction, lying in the sun, writing poetry, pretending email has never been invented

I wish all of you much wisdom and energy as you continue to run the university and the universe in my absence, physical and virtual

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he was loved by many people who knew him well while I linger with the gaps between chapters stories bumping into stories with the clang of loss a poet's endless knell

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