

HOLDING FAST TO H: RUMINATIONS ON THE ARTS PRECONFERENCE

CARL LEGGO

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.

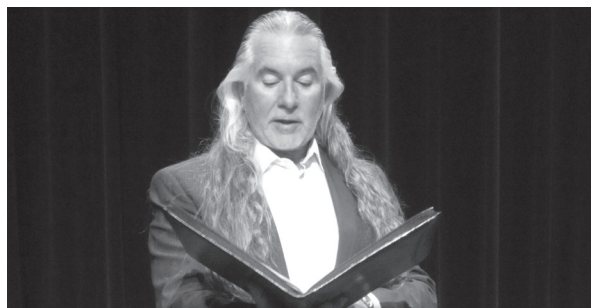


photo by B. Bickel, 2015

BIO:

Carl Leggo is a poet and professor at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. His books include: *Come-By-Chance*; *Lifewriting as Literary Métissage and an Ethos for Our Times* (co-authored with Erika Hasebe-Ludt and Cynthia Chambers); *Creative Expression, Creative Education* (co-edited with Robert Kelly); *Sailing in a Concrete Boat*; *Arresting Hope: Prisons That Heal* (co-edited with Ruth Martin, Mo Korchinski, and Lynn Fels); *Arts-based and Contemplative Practices in Research and Teaching: Honoring Presence* (co-edited with Susan Walsh and Barbara Bickel); *Hearing Echoes* (co-authored with Renee Norman); and *Poetic inquiry: Enchantment of Place* (co-edited with Pauline Sameshima, Alexandra Fidyk, and Kedrick James).

Like bpNichol, the Canadian writer, poet, and editor, one of my favourite letters of the Alphabet 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 H in 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-monger. 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.

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.

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

2

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

22

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

References

- Aoki, T. T. (1993/2005). The child-centered curriculum: Where is the social in pedocentricism? In W. F. Pinar & R. L. Irwin (Eds.), *Curriculum in a new key: The collected works of Ted T. Aoki* (pp. 279–289). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Bowering, G., & Ondaatje, M. (Eds.). (1994). *An H in the heart: bpNichol: A reader*. Toronto, ON: McClelland & Stewart.
- Hirshfield, J. (1997). *Nine gates: Entering the mind of poetry*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.
- Kohl, H. R. (1998). *The discipline of hope: Learning from a lifetime of teaching*. New York, NY: The New Press.
- Martin, R., Korchinski, M., Fels, L., & Leggo, C. (Eds.). (2014). *Arresting hope: Women taking action in prison health inside out*. Toronto, ON: Inanna Publications.
- Oliver, M. (1994). *A poetry handbook*. Boston, MA: Mariner Books.
- Oliver, M. (1992). *New and selected poems: Volume one*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Sontag, S. (1962). "Happenings: An art of radical juxtaposition." *Text Revue*. Retrieved on September 17, 2018 at: http://www.text-revue.net/revue/heft_7/happenings-an-art-of-radical_juxtaposition/text
- Tompkins, J. (1987). Me and my shadow. *New Literary History*, 19(1), 169-178.
- Zapruder, M. (2017). *Why poetry*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

