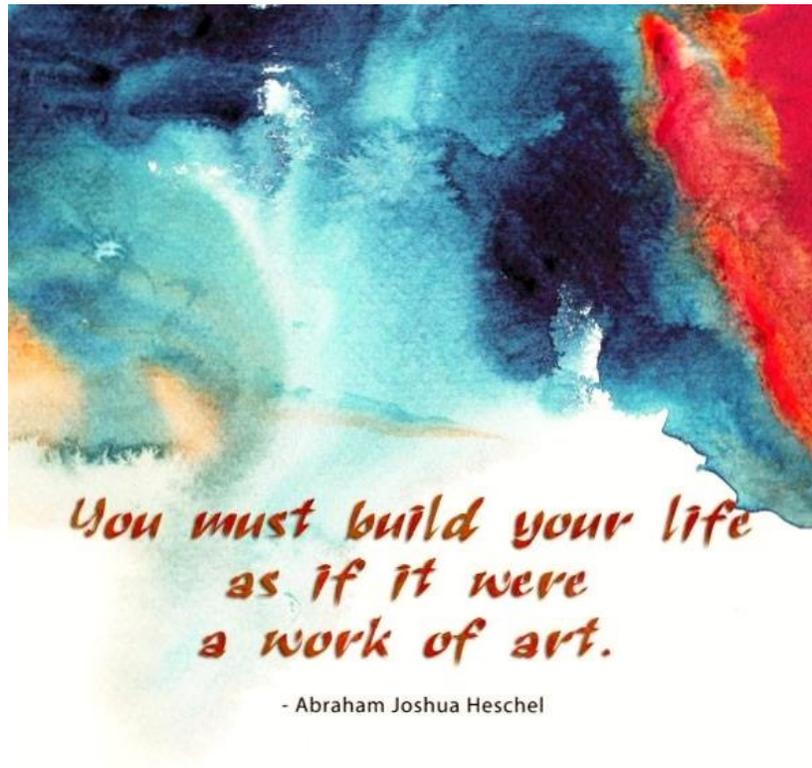


# Poetry and the Spirituality of Human Endeavor



[www.WordSPA.net](http://www.WordSPA.net)

[AskKimLangley@gmail.com](mailto:AskKimLangley@gmail.com)

216.226.3351

Materials developed by Kim Langley, M.Ed. for WordSPA ministry

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## Think and Do

I always have to be doing something, accomplishing something, fixing something, going somewhere, feeling purposeful, useful, competent - even coughing, as I just did, gives me the satisfaction of having "just cleared something up." The phone bill arrives and minutes later I've written the check. The world starts to go to war and I shout, "Hey, wait a second, let's think about this!" and they lay down their arms and ruminate. Now they are frozen in postures of thought, like Rodin's statue, the one outside Philosophy Hall at Columbia. His accomplishments are muscular. How could a guy with such big muscles be thinking so much? It gives you the idea that he's worked all his life to get those muscles, and now he has no use for them. It makes him pensive, sober, even depressed sometimes, and because his range of motion is nil, he cannot leap down from the pedestal and attend classes in Philosophy Hall. I am so lucky to be elastic! I am so happy to be able to think of the word elastic! I am so happy to be able to think of the word elastic, and have it snap me back to underwear, which reminds me: I have to do the laundry soon.

By Ron Padgett, from *You Never Know* © Coffee House Press, 2001.



## **This Shining Moment in the Now**

When I work outdoors all day, every day, as I do now, in the fall, getting ready for winter, tearing up the garden, digging potatoes, gathering the squash, cutting firewood, making kindling, repairing bridges over the brook, clearing trails in the woods, doing the last of the fall mowing, pruning apple trees, taking down the screens, putting up the storm windows, banking the house—all these things, as preparation for the coming cold...

when I am every day all day all body and no mind, when I am physically, wholly and completely, in this world with the birds, the deer, the sky, the wind, the trees...

when day after day I think of nothing but what the next chore is, when I go from clearing woods roads, to sharpening a chain saw, to changing the oil in a mower, to stacking wood, when I am all body and no mind...

when I am only here and now and nowhere else—then, and only then, do I see the crippling power of mind, the curse of thought, and I pause and wonder why I so seldom find this shining moment in the now.

By David Budbill, from *While We've Still Got Feet* © Copper Canyon Press.



## The Leaden Eyed

Let not young souls be smothered out before  
They do quaint deeds and fully flaunt their pride.  
It is the world's one crime: its' babes grow dull,  
Its' poor are ox-like, limp, and leaden-eyed.  
Not that they starve -- but starve so dreamlessly;  
Not that they sow -- but that they seldom reap;  
Not that they serve -- but have no gods to serve;  
Not that they die -- but that they die like sheep.

By Nicholas Vachel Lindsey

## To be of use

The people I love the best  
jump into work head first  
without dallying in the shallows  
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.  
They seem to become natives of that element,  
the black sleek heads of seals  
bouncing like half-submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,  
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,  
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,  
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge  
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest  
and work in a row and pass the bags along,  
who are not parlor generals and field deserters  
but move in a common rhythm  
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.  
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.  
But the thing worth doing well done  
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.  
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,  
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums  
but you know they were made to be used.  
The pitcher cries for water to carry  
and a person for work that is real.

By Marge Piercy from *Circles on the Water*. © Alfred A. Knopf.



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## **ONE TIME MY DAD**

One time my dad said to me, I don't  
see why people complain about how hard they work  
or how tired they are. Nobody works hard but  
farmers, miners, lumberjacks and foundry workers.  
This was before power tools, tractors, and such things, and all  
the work was done by hand. When farmers in Upstate New York  
left to get away from the stones, what  
they found in Southern Michigan were: more stones.  
As they cleared the land, the horses hauled the black walnut trees  
and stumps to the side of the field and the farmers burned them.  
Black walnut was no good to them, too hard to work.  
Grandpa Conde, when he finally left the farm and moved  
to Milan, got a job in the foundry and walked to work  
and back, six days a week, 12 hours  
a day, for 50 cents a day. He thought  
he was sitting pretty. Whenever the noon whistle blew, people  
would say, Well, Hell's out for lunch. But he would sit  
down in a cool place and eat his lunch.  
Once, when she was a little girl, Aunt Ida  
asked her father, who was working in his garden, why  
he worked so hard and wasn't he tired? Grandpa  
straightened up from his hoeing and answered: I never get tired.

By Richard E. McMullen from *Not Only Love*. © Crowfoot Press.

## **People Who Take Care**

People who take care of people  
get paid less than anybody  
people who take care of people  
are not worth much  
except to people who are  
sick, old, helpless, and poor  
people who take care of people  
are not important to most other people  
are not respected by many other people  
come and go without much fuss  
unless they don't show up  
when needed  
people who make more money  
tell them what to do  
never get shit on their hands  
never mop vomit or wipe tears  
don't stand in danger  
of having plates thrown at them  
sharing every cold  
observing agonies  
they cannot tell at home

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people who take care of people  
have a secret  
that sees them through the double shift  
that moves with them from room to room  
that keeps them on the floor  
sometimes they fill a hollow  
no one else can fill  
sometimes through the shit  
and blood and tears  
they go to a beautiful place, somewhere  
those clean important people  
have never been.

By Nancy Henry from *Hard*. © MuscleHead Press.

### **Egg**

I'm scrambling an egg for my daughter.  
"Why are you always whistling?" she asks.  
"Because I'm happy."  
And it's true.  
Though it stuns me to say it aloud;  
There was a time when I wouldn't  
Have seen it as my future.  
It's partly a matter  
Of who is there to eat the egg:  
The self fallen out of love with itself  
Through the tedium of familiarity,  
Or this little self,  
So curious, so hungry,  
Who emerged from the woman I love,  
A woman who loves me in a way  
I've come to think I deserve,  
Now that it arrives from outside me.  
Everything changes, we're told,  
And now the changes are everywhere:  
The house with its morning light  
That fills me like a revelation,  
The yard with its trees  
That cast a bit more shade each summer,  
The love of a woman  
That both is and isn't confounding,  
And the love  
Of this clamor of questions at my waist.  
Clamor of questions,  
You clamor of answers,  
Here's your egg.

By C.G. Hanzlicek



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## The Gardener

*For Kit*

You get down on your knees in the dark earth—alone  
for hours in hot sun, yanking weed roots, staking trellises,  
burning your shoulders, swatting gnats; you strain your muscled  
midwestern neck and back, callous your pianist's hands.

You cut roses back so they won't fruit, rip out and replace  
spent annuals. You fill your garden dense with roots and vines.  
And when a humble sprout climbs like a worm up out of death,  
you are there to bless it, in your green patch, all spring and summer long,

hose like a scepter, a reliquary vessel; you hum  
through the dreamy wilderness—no one to judge, absolve,  
or be absolved—purified by labor, confessed by its whisperings, connected  
to its innocence. So when you heft a woody, brushy tangle, or stumble

inside grimy, spent by earth, I see all the sacraments in place—  
and the redeemed world never smelled so sweet.

By Ken Weisner, from *Anything on Earth*. © Hummingbird Press, 2010



## Messenger

My work is loving the world.  
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird —  
equal seekers of sweetness.  
Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.  
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.  
Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?  
Am I no longer young, and still not half-perfect? Let me  
keep my mind on what matters,  
which is my work,  
which is mostly standing still and learning to be  
astonished.  
The phoebe, the delphinium.  
The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.  
Which is mostly rejoicing, since all ingredients are here,  
which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart  
and these body-clothes,  
a mouth with which to give shouts of joy  
to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy dug-up clam,  
telling them all, over and over, how it is  
that we live forever.

By Mary Oliver



## **A Prayer among Friends**

Among other wonders of our lives, we are alive  
with one another, we walk here  
in the light of this unlikely world  
that isn't ours for long.  
May we spend generously  
the time we are given.  
May we enact our responsibilities  
as thoroughly as we enjoy  
our pleasures. May we see with clarity,  
may we seek a vision  
that serves all beings, may we honor  
the mystery surpassing our sight,  
and may we hold in our hands  
the gift of good work  
and bear it forth whole, as we  
were borne forth by a power we praise  
to this one Earth, this homeland of all we love.

By John Daniel, from *Of Earth*. © Lost Horse Press, 2012.



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