Rick Holinger Column April 24, 2025

If up to me, every month would be Poetry Month

I know, you’re thinking, “I don’t get poetry,” or “Who needs poetry when I’ve got a Smart Phone?”, or “Didn’t Robert Frost write a poem about stopping at a fork in the road one chilly winter night after earlier that afternoon mending a wall?”

Strange that people shirk from talking about—or reading—poetry when it is verse brought out like a sage older uncle when someone gets married or dies. Why? Because poetry in the best and most concise way intones the things we live for, or live among: love, wonder, beauty, loss, adoration, fear, awe, silence, relief, joy, anger, transcendence, loneliness, grief, togetherness…. Well, you get the point.

This month, Yvonne Boose, WNIJ’s (89.5 FM) Art Reporter and host of NPR’s “Poetically Yours Extended Broadcast,” interviewed me to talk about poetry. When she asked about writing my first poem, I recalled waking at 5:00 A.M. and rowing a boat over a silent lake with white mist rising from the surface. The poem recalls casting a plastic frog into lily pads and watching a bass spear upwards to catch it.

Reading it today embarrasses me, but my parents liked it and hung it, framed, by the lake cabin’s front door. People read it (it’s blissfully short) and rave about it. I cringe and smile and say, “Thank you.” I’ve stopped apologizing for its naivete, its simplicity. Maybe people like it because they understand it. The poem, if meaning anything, means how terrific I felt that morning. Period.

I’ve grown as a poet, trying to write about events in my life reflecting the larger world. My last poem describes two persons who work in a retail warehouse grocery store, the first helping those in self-checkout aisles weigh their bananas, etc.

“He paces back…and…forth / between / tiered boxed candy bars / and the first in a line of checkout stations….” The poem, titled, “The Leopard and the Hawker,” also describes a man outside collecting carts calling to shoppers in a stentorian voice greetings he does not let them dismiss, attacking them with “HI, HOW ARE YOU?”; “THANK YOU VERY MUCH!”; “WHAT’S HAPPENING?”

For me, the poem recalls not merely two individuals, but the introvert who silently keeps to himself until called to duty, and the narcissist who constantly calls to others for their attention. Will readers recognize themselves as one or the other? Will they condemn one lifestyle and cling to the other? Will they see in friends and relatives as one type or the other? Will they recognize how one lifestyle can be as destructive—or fruitful—to spiritual wellbeing as the other?

For me, poetry does not recommend or abjure how to live. It shows. It reveals. And each line of a poem, while being written, is as much, or more, a revelation to the writer as to the reader.

Poetry, however, does not only exist as a poem.

On April 10, 1925, about hundred years ago, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s masterpiece, *The Great Gatsby*, was published. To my great joy—and, at times, my frustration—I taught the text for forty years to high school juniors.

Or, should I say, praised its poesy. A descriptive phrase like “the wedding cake of the ceiling” to describe crown molding, or the grass “running part way into the house” to suggest a luxuriant emerald lawn, works when read, our imaginations melding those metaphors into rich, opulent images. Try translating those literally into film, and they become surreal absurdities.

The takeaway here is to find poetry in verse, in prose, in nature, in relationships—in all we consume, emotionally and physically. Enfold the rhythm, the thrum. Enfold the patterns and differences. Enfold the promise and the protected. Enfold the best and enlighten the least.