

*A LITTLE BOOK
OF LIVING
THROUGH THE DAY
Poems During a Pandemic*



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Wising Up Press

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FOREWORD

The poems collected here are a result of the pandemic. I wrote them in order to make it through the day, the night, and the day-after-day of the pandemic. Days of worry. Days of confusion. Days of social unrest. Days of figuring out how to get through the days.

I grew up on a farm just east of the Mississippi and north of the Ohio Rivers. I am a farmer from the lower-Midwest with roots in North Carolina. I grew up listening to the Grand Ol' Opry. My rural roots are a through-line of my life. When I look at nature, I can't see only beauty.

Nowadays, I live in a condo in Minneapolis, Minnesota. How I got here both baffles me and fills me with gratitude. I am the senior minister of a historically humanist Unitarian Universalist congregation. Perhaps some of the poems in this collection will sound like liturgy to your ear. That's because they probably are, written for oral presentation in the congregation and at protests.

The pandemic hit congregations hard—we could not do one of the most important things congregations do: gather together. As a minister, I preached not to a gathering of human beings but to a camera. I knew that each person was, like me, living with the day-after-day. What could be said to help us make it?

I officiated weddings and funerals over the months, speaking to the dying and the grieving online. And, every Sunday, I said something to the silence that was the listening congregation.

Many of my ministerial colleagues despaired at preaching to a camera. But as a poet, I am accustomed to speaking to silence. Not to no one, mind you. But silent and imagined faces.

What words might reassure after hours of “doom-scrolling”? Might reassure but not lie?

For us all, the pandemic has been a time to make use of our inner resources. For me, my most dependable inner resource is writing these poems that have added up to a little book about living through the day.

May they help you do that as well.

STUCK AT TIMES

Remember: you can live through
the stasis of the afternoon.

I've been there.
You've been there.
We've seen it,

the mottled window panes
clotted in finger prints,
the leaves of ornamental
trees stillborn in the air.

The stasis of the afternoon
can be survived, whatever
time it arrives.

You've done it.
I've done it.
We've seen it.

Sometimes it is a chair.
Sometimes it is a bed.
Sometimes only the dirt.

Wherever. We have survived
the stasis of the afternoon,

by throwing our hearts against
the egregious door;
by writing into the air.

Whichever. Whatever.
All of the above.

You've done it.
I've done it.

We have survived
the stasis of
the afternoon.

BEAUTIFUL WOUND, REALLY

It comes out of nowhere—
out of the forever that
locks the soul and throws
the key into one abyss or
another. It comes of
having an umbilical cord.

It turns us to shadows
on the heath, howling
at the dark, complaining

of the local musicians.
It looks like boredom
sometimes; sometimes

despair, sometimes
voiceless, panicked
terror—or all—it's

hard to tell when
you aren't
breathing.

It is the wound
that makes you
rise and shine.

That leaves you
staring out windows.
That leaves you

spelunking.
That corners
your songs.

It's the rip in
the fabric of
your only

space and time.
It comes of belly
buttons and leaves . . .

never. It's what
you're holding on-
to with every song.

RISE AGAINST THE LIES

Wince. Wince again. Still, the fog is there.
Still the whistling wind that never stills.

Here's to our failure to think clearly. Ever.
Here's to thinking that we do. Too often.

Here's to how truth seeps in. Slowly. Cheers!
(Or guffaws. Snickers. Boos. Whatever.)

Here's to the pieces we call "put together."
Here's to the fragments in scattered pieces.

Here's to the motions we call living.
Here's to the moments we call "right here."

Let's agree to this much:
that we will not pull away.

Consider how this works: the earth
does not pull away from the sky.
Consider how this works:

the sky does not leave the earth behind.
Here's to a rise against the lies. Cheers!

And to so much more.
Cheers. Truly. *A ta santé*

FREEDOM ON ITS WAY

No, you can't redeem
the dust of the ancestors.
They did their musts.
They served their time.

Can't fix 'em.
Can't free 'em.
Can't explain away.

No, you can't redeem
the dust of the ancestors.

There's a thing called "past."
That's a thing called "done."
You can't redeem the dust.

But pull on those boots
and pull up those jeans
anyway. Go out and be
today. Go, help
raise some dust.

HANGING A SWING

That tree that's planted
in your mind, the one with
the serpent entwined, you
know that's not real,
yet here you are with

that tree in your mind.
Let's not chop it down,
though that's a response.

Let's not chop it down,
but look instead beyond
the serpent and the up
and down. Let's look
around and see the shade

and maybe hang a swing
in that tree and sway
in that tree in your mind.

YOUR PROJECT

There's a project
your life's got;

for some, it's plain;
for others not.

There's a shape
it all will take;

for some it's awry;
for others straight.

There's a back-story
that shapes our end;

we can call it an evil;
we can make it a friend.

There's a project
your life's got;

find it, do it,
hug your ought.

ROOM FOR WAITING

There is the arriving.
There is the going away.
There is the train-siding

with its birds and debris.

How fast a world crumbles.
How slowly one gathers again.

And waiting. And waiting.

There is the falling rain
beating,

beating against windows.

How slowly a world gathers,
if ever one arrives. Yet
something glimmers—both

birds and debris. Rain.
Windows. Trains.
Arriving. Arriving.