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I recently picked up [Clint Smith](#)'s latest collection of poetry, *[Above Ground](#)*, and was immediately captivated by it. On a flight from the East Coast to California, I read the poems in that uniquely quiet space of a pressurized airplane cabin. And even though the aircraft was flying at the almost incomprehensible speed of about 540 miles per hour, my world felt appropriately slowed down.

I marveled at the beauty, power and timeliness of Smith's poems. A staff writer for *The Atlantic* magazine and an award-winning author, his expressions of fatherhood and race, war and violence, love and loss in this volume are absolutely engaging. The act of reading felt more like praying, reminding me that poetry has a transformative potential that can transport a reader not necessarily into another space, but into another modality of perception.

The experience of being slowed down and engaged by what can otherwise be described as simple words on a page led me to reflect on why I don't spend more time with poetry, and why it seems that so many other people are in a similar boat.

In the introduction to his 2017 book *[Why Poetry](#)*, Matthew Zapruder, a poet and a professor, writes: "Like classical music, poetry has an unfortunate reputation for requiring specialist training and education to appreciate, which makes most of us feel (unnecessarily) as if we haven't studied enough to read it."

This sentiment is one that, at various points in my life, has resonated with my experience of approaching a literary genre that can indeed be intimidating. Even in preparation for writing this column, I have felt the pangs of self-consciousness about whether I am "expert" enough when it comes to poetry to say anything worthwhile; that perhaps I should stick to theology and culture and politics.

'When I do take time for poetry, I never regret it.'

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But Zapruder makes a compelling case that this self-consciousness is ultimately misplaced. He explains: "To learn to read poetry is first a matter of forgetting many incorrect things we have learned in school. And then of learning to accept what is

right before us on the page." He adds that instead of thinking of poetry as some elite, rarefied field for the well-educated or artistic, we should take the words and lines and themes at face value, engaging with what is on the page. "People carry so many incorrect ideas about poetry into their readings of it, ones that ruin the experience before they even get to have it."

The key focal point when it comes to poetry ought to be on the experience the poem elicits in us and the world into which we enter through the creation of a given text. Zapruder frames the issue that inspired his book in this way: "The question was not really what poetry is (poems can be so many things), but why it is written, and what it does."

I have had a mixed relationship to poetry over the years. As a young adult I enjoyed certain poems and admired their authors. I recall, for instance, memorizing [Edgar Allen Poe](#)'s lengthy gothic classic "The Raven" as a high school student (if you're not familiar with it, treat yourself to [The Simpsons' rendition](#), recited by the great actor James Earl Jones). At that point in my life, filled with youthful emotion and lacking the inhibition that is so often acquired with age, I wrote some of my own poetry. And then I stopped.

In the ensuing years, I would still occasionally pick up a volume of poetry from one of my favorite poets, such as [Mary Oliver](#) (whose expression of the natural world still captivates me like no other) or [Seamus Heaney](#) (whose short poem "[Scaffolding](#)" remains one of my favorite love poems).

Occasionally, I would find myself with a newly published collection by a contemporary poet, such as the hauntingly beautiful work of [Claudia Rankine](#), whose 2014 collection [Citizen: An American Lyric](#) is one of the decade's most powerful and important books on race and justice in the American context.

But the truth is that I just wouldn't do that very often. For decades I did not engage with poetry. As time went on, I felt as though what Zapruder describes in *Why Poetry* took greater hold on me; the lack of engagement led to an increasing sense of unfamiliarity, intimidation, and eventual disinterest at the thought of picking up a volume to read or a pen to write.

However, that began to change for me during the pandemic.

In those early months of the pandemic, when the world was frozen and we were unwitting hermits, I found myself drawn back into the world of verse. One of the things I noticed right away was that it was less jarring to have my personal world slowed down when the rest of the world felt comparably stilled. It was during this time that I realized that this is probably the primary reason poetry had slipped from my list of priorities.

Like so many (if not most or all) people, my life had only become busier over time. Not only is this observation experiential and anecdotal (it felt busier), but a quick review of my calendar, travel schedule, deadlines, teaching and research and administrative and ministry obligations over the years provides empirical and quantifiable evidence to back up the feeling.

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While I hesitate to say anything that might be misconstrued as suggesting there were "silver linings" to a global pandemic that has killed millions of people and continues to wreak havoc on the lives and livelihoods of millions more, I do recognize that those early months of the pandemic created the condition of the possibility for me to reconnect with poetry. I'm grateful for that. But my problem since then has been that as we have collectively returned to the "new normal" of post-pandemic life, the busyness and speed of life have once again picked up, and engaging with poetry of any kind has again slipped away as a priority.

The experience of reading Smith's *Above Ground* reminded me that I need to be better about carving out times and spaces for poetry, that I shouldn't merely wait for a global pandemic to impose a universal cloister or a plane ride with limited intrusions, but I should make it a more regular practice.

In this way, I keep thinking about prayer, which shouldn't be surprising given that the central prayer of the church is the Liturgy of the Hours, composed as it is of ancient poetry in the form of the Psalms. Just as praying the Psalms several times a day creates a particular rhythm of life for religious, so too reading (or, at times, even praying) poetry can take us out of the hustle and bustle of modern life with its nonstop demands and distractions.

As a [distance runner](#), I often think of the well-known expression, "the only runs you regret are the ones you don't do." My experience since the pandemic has reminded me that when I do take time for poetry, I never regret it. I may not feel especially inspired or even like a certain poem, collection, or poet, but I believe it's important to develop the discipline of letting the practice of poetry slow me down.

Like more traditional forms of prayer, reading poetry is a kind of spiritual exercise. And just as finding the motivation for physical exercise can be difficult, so too is that the case with poetry. But like running and praying the Liturgy of the Hours, it is always worth the effort.