

“Poetry is the mother tongue of the human race.”

J.G. Hamann (1730–1788)

How do we negotiate our way through the difficult terrain of an uncertain world? The unsettling realities of contemporary life nudge us to seek for a place of assurance and hope. We may be well served in this matter by the gift of poetry, whether we write the poetry ourselves or take up the crafted verse of others. Poetry is not itself a solution to the challenges we face, but is a resource that allows us to articulate our deepest emotions or perhaps opens us to discern an alternative beyond our immediate circumstances.

In his book *The Witness of Poetry*, Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz (1911–2004) speaks of poetry as “a passionate pursuit of the real”. The arts can become accomplices in the dark agenda of tyrannizing power, but they can also serve as the prophetic voice that unmask the falsehood and lightens the path that leads out of the darkness. Milosz strikes a hopeful note at the end of his book when he expresses his belief that poetry may be of service in helping to relieve the tensions of our modern world. I don’t wish to give poetry status as a solution for social

ills but only to suggest that poetry reaches to the heart of what it means to be human and is capable of generating a humanizing influence in its social context. It does this in a way that transcends the flatland of a merely literal account of the world.

It engages the language of metaphor and symbol and so hooks the imagination and calls us to fresh awareness.

Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain gives the following account; “By poetry I mean, not the particular art which consists in writing verses, but a process



A 13th century book illumination for the beginning of Psalm 1. David playing the harp.

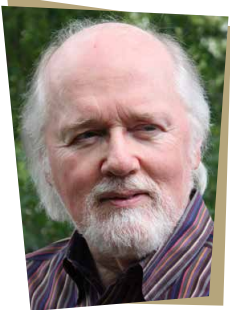
both more general and more primary: that intercommunication between the inner being of things and the inner being of the human self which is a kind of divination.” Put more simply Maritain sees poetry as a resource of spiritual energy, a means of non-conceptual intuitive knowledge. Here the profound givenness of things, their very existence somehow speaks to the human heart perhaps a resonance made possible because of their common source.

The connection between poetry and religious faith is clear. This is so despite the fact that many poets are indifferent or outright negative toward religion. It is as though the poetic impulse reaches to connect to or be united with some power or

presence glimpsed through our experience of the world.

A deeper connection that merits attention is the link between poetry and prayer. American poet Denise Levertov (1923–1997) devoted considerable attention to spiritual matters. Though an agnostic for many years, in the 1970s a shift occurred away from religious doubt toward belief. It was as a result of her writing of poetry that the new direction emerged. A long-time activist for social concerns her work revealed a turn toward religion. She once claimed that the poet’s goal was “to live with a door of one’s life open to the transcendent, the numinous.” For Levertov poetry was something akin to

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Crossings Concluded

Tuesday April 26 2022 was the last day of the *Crossings* exhibition – the end of a two and a half year journey. This all-outdoor exhibition had sixteen art works in sixteen different locations allowing for a “pilgrimage walk” of the Stations of the Cross. We estimate that attendance was between 16,000 and 18,000 who visited all or part of the exhibition. Comments on the exhibition were consistently positive. Many expressed surprise that such a large exhibition taking up a Christian story would be possible in our current cultural climate where the church has been under scrutiny and we were enduring the challenges of a pandemic. Numerous expressions of gratitude were received noting how the art and the story it told spoke to those who took time to visit the exhibit. By all standards we can say that the project was a great success. One of our concerns was the potential for vandalism and we are pleased to say not one of the display units or art works were touched. It was as though each piece of art occupied a sacred space and was protected.

We deeply appreciate the work of the *Crossings*’ Steering Committee and the generosity of all those who shared the vision and assisted us in funding the exhibition. And also to the leadership at the sixteen locations who provided us with venues for displaying the art.

The images, poetry and reflections found in the catalogue will be made available on our website by the end of 2022. We are grateful to the artists, poets and authors all of whom readily accepted the invitation to participate.

Crossings was the largest project that IMAGO has done in its 50 year history and thanks to an outstanding team and the prayers of many it took a form and had an outcome that exceeded all we had imagined.



Poetry and the Psalms

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prayer. It was a means of communicating as well as of listening and receiving. We may look to poets to give language to our deepest hopes, fears, losses and longings. Poetry plays at the edges of mystery.

In a world where much that is true has been made small, flattened, reduced, and ultimately trivialized, how do we find our way to recover what has been lost? Walter Brueggemann comments on just such a situation in a book on preaching – *Finally Comes the Poet*. “To address the issue of a truth greatly reduced requires us to be poets that speak against a prose world. ... By prose I refer to a world that is organized in settled formulae.... By poetry, I do not mean rhyme, rhythm or meter, but language... that jumps at the right moment, that breaks open old worlds with surprise, abrasion and pace. Poetic speech is the only proclamation worth doing in a situation of reductionism.”

The biblical narrative is replete with poetry. It is found in the writings of the prophets where their intent is at times to unmask the errors of their hearers and at other times

to remind them of the ground of their hope. Our inclination to embrace the practices of self-reliance and control takes us down a path that is unsatisfying and ultimately destructive while failing to deliver what we want or hope for.

Beyond the poetry of the prophets is the poetry of the psalms where we find a narrative of a counter-world to the one we daily inhabit. Ancient Israel received this narrative by engaging both poetic form and music. They would have known the psalms well. What we sing and what we memorize will nurture our spiritual formation. Fourth century theologian Athanasius noted that most of scripture speaks *to* us while the psalms speak *for* us. They speak in realistic tones. There are notes of despair, fear, frustration, anger and uncertainty, a raw honest account of human experience. Yet we also find expressions of praise, gratitude, longing, hope and trust. The psalms are not a means of escape but a context where we are able to face the darkness of our own situation as well as being reminded of the reassuring promise of what is yet to come. We commonly turn to the psalms when words fail us and we find among those 150 poems,

IMAGO turns 50

On November 2nd 2022 IMAGO will turn 50. The hope was to have an in-person event to mark this anniversary. Because of extenuating circumstances the decision was made not to hold a gathering this fall but to carry the celebration into 2023. There are plans underway to have events that will allow us to acknowledge the unique history of IMAGO. Wilber Sutherland and those who gathered around him to support the vision that became IMAGO would not likely have expected a 50 year sojourn for this innovative organization. However its value has been exceptional for many, artists in particular, in allowing creative initiatives to move from dream to reality. We will let you know details of events coming in 2023.

IMAGO is a registered charity and relies on the support of those who share the vision for a more intentional engagement of faith and the arts. Your support is what keeps us going. Donations may be received online through Canada Helps, on the IMAGO website www.imago-arts.org or by mail to IMAGO 630 Indian Road, Toronto, ON M6P 2C6

words that capture what we are experiencing, and that express the wide range of human emotion. We are able to draw from the psalms an enriched experience and deeper understanding of God, the world and ourselves. The psalms are a resource of comfort and hope in a world gone awry, but to receive what they have to offer requires the discipline of attention a rare practice in our fast-paced world.

(This is a revised version of a piece from the IMAGO newsletter Spring 2016.)

John Franklin, *Executive Director*
133 Southvale Drive, Toronto, ON M4G 1G6
416-421-8745 imago@rogers.com
www.imago-arts.org
Visit Imago on Facebook.