

Strive to Be Poets: Charge to the Graduating Class of 2018

Theodore J. Wardlaw

Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Austin, Texas

I have discovered a new poet—new to me, at least. The truth is that she's an extremely well-known poet, so much so that she's the twenty-second poet laureate of the United States, an office she assumed just last year. She's a graduate of Harvard College and Columbia University, and she now lives in Princeton with her husband and three children and teaches Creative Writing at Princeton University. Her name is Tracy K. Smith, she's the fifth African-American poet laureate, in just her mid-forties she's still young, and she was raised in a religious family which had deep roots in Alabama. "Her people were from there," we Southerners might say.

A while back, I was intrigued to read an article about her in *The New York Times Magazine* entitled "The Poem Cure," in which the case was made that bringing poetry to the masses can be an antidote to our toxic civic culture. The writer of this article had followed Tracy K. Smith on a purposeful pilgrimage that took her to many locations in South Carolina. Now I know a thing or two about South Carolina. It's a place where, at every dirt-road intersection, there's an oft-remembered story about something that happened involving somebody's ancestor that will never be forgotten—because, in South Carolina, the past isn't even past yet. Tracy K. Smith went to South Carolina, where she took a road-trip and met at each stop an audience of people eager to hear her work. In the main, these were not crowds of the literati from Charleston; no, these were "everyday people" in the process of falling in love with her poetry. She went to Lake City, South Carolina, only fifteen miles from the small Lowcountry county-seat town in which I spent a portion of my childhood. She went to Summerton, South Carolina, only thirty-five miles from where I was born and baptized, and while there, an elderly lady named Ella Johnson asked Tracy K. Smith to sign her program, and so Ms. Smith obliged, signed her name, and wrote a one-word poem: "Grace." The old lady responded, "'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home."

Another stop on her tour was a little wide spot in the woods called Adams Run, South Carolina. It's where, for maybe a couple of weeks during most of our summer vacations, Kay and the girls and I have turned off of Highway 17 to take this two-lane county road to Edisto Island and our favorite beach. We go right through Adams Run, which is hardly more than a crossroads with no red light. In Adams Run, there's a tiny antebellum Episcopal Church named Christ Church that is surrounded by a cemetery where its oldest tombstones are often bedecked—especially on holidays—with tiny versions of the Confederate flag fluttering in the breeze. Next door to that church is an old schoolhouse that is now a community center, and in that space there was a sizeable crowd gathered there to hear Ms. Smith; they were about equal parts black and white. She was introduced there by the poet laureate of Charleston, who said, "Tracy's making poetry cool." Elsewhere in the crowd, there was a United States congressman, a state senator, not just the poet laureate of Charleston but also the poet laureate of South Carolina, a woodworker, a local councilwoman, a mother with her

teenaged daughter, a guy who runs a roadside fish market, and even a pair of off-duty police officers. When the event was over, everyone surrounded her for autographs, and those policemen invited her to come back and ride along in their police car on her next visit. They wanted her to experience the work they do, and she promised to take them up on it.

The thought of such *community* showing up and expressing itself with such beauty: it just took my breath away to read about it. After all, we live in a country in which, after Friday's school shooting here in Texas, near Houston, we have created a grim new statistic: in just this portion of 2018—not yet half a year in—more Americans have been killed in school than have been killed on active U.S. military duty anywhere in the world.

It makes me think that we need to get political. Political in the way that people of faith get political.

There's one of her poems that, from the article's description of it, sounded particularly interesting to me. Tracy Smith wrote this poem a few years ago while she was up in Vermont for a few days giving a seminar. She was asleep in the middle of the night, and she had a dream that she was reading a poem that was written on the wall of her bedroom, and in the dream she said to herself, "If I wake up, this can be my poem." And so she woke up, and she wrote it down, and since it was about two men mowing their fields in rural Vermont, she named it "The Mowers." Later, she changed the title. She renamed it "Political Poem," because, she said, "A political poem in any age is valuable if it can challenge the easy sense of 'us versus them.' Political poems that *fail*," she said, "say 'I'm US,' which is good, and I'm going to call out these THEMES." In poems like that, she said, "you're making bad art, even if you're thinking about justice."

It's not enough, after all, to simply cultivate a hermeneutic of suspicion at the expense of a hermeneutic of generosity or encouragement or humility. A dear friend of mine, who has taught for years at another seminary, wrote me recently lamenting that in this time "we have reduced theology to ethics, namely our own self-regulated and self-flattering view of righteousness." And that's just not enough. We need to get more truly political than that; we need to engage each other in love. In this world in which we are so often assaulted by the brutal and the vulgar—by a kind of politics that takes no prisoners, whether it's national politics or church politics—we need a larger definition of the word "political." I was so taken by her notion of a "political poem" that I went out and bought her book—the one that contains "Political Poem." I hope you'll do that, too. All of her poems are astonishing, but look first for this one. It's a bit complex, but it has something to say.

Two people, probably two strangers, are mowing fields not so far apart from one another. Perhaps a mile, at most, separates them. They might remain oblivious to one another forever, except that in Smith's poem, each happens to turn and look across a huge divide, and the poet imagines that something happens. As far apart as their work places each from the other, the two mowers nonetheless sense their commonality. One waves across the distance to the other, and the other responds. To read this example of lyrical brilliance is to be reminded of what is profound about the gesture of communication. It makes room for another, and for so much more.

If they thought to, or would, or even half-wanted,
their work—the humming, human engines
pushed across the grass, and the grass, blade
after blade assenting—would take forever.
But I love how long it would last.¹

When I think of those mowers finding themselves, as if by accident, in a new community of two, I think of that gesture you came up with during this particular school year now ending, when you decided to endorse that wonderful community covenant you created. In many ways, community was threatened across this last year, and some walls were built. But these two mowers are not interested in building walls—be they walls of brick or stone or words or opinions—walls to separate the US-es from the THEMS. They are instead exploring an unexpected discovery of empathy and understanding, and perhaps a shared passion for the impact they are making upon their world; and none of that is enough unless they keep looking up and searching for and finding the other.

Friends, this world is so broken that it breaks the heart of Jesus. So, as you go out into it—whatever else you do—don't make bad art, even if you are thinking about justice. No. Instead, strive to be poets. Be the people who see the world as God sees it, and who tell the truth about it so that the thing that is prematurely settled gets properly unsettled. Be poets who point people toward each other, who look at certainty, and show how, in the name of God, that's not enough. And as poets, of course, point your people toward the ultimate, most important poems themselves—the pictures of God, the poet of the world, and God's purposes, from Genesis to Revelation, from the prophets to the martyrs, to the saints, to the apostles, to the church.

Be poets, and point people toward the most important poems of all, for God's sake and for the sake of the world.

Notes

1 Tracy K. Smith, *Wade in the Water* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2018), 54.