

Time for poetry

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [August 24, 2010](#) issue

When I am blessed with a little more leisure time than usual, I like to spend some of it with poetry. This summer I am thoroughly enjoying *God Particles*, by Thomas Lux, who teaches poetry at the Georgia Institute of Technology. From the title poem: "God explodes, supernovas, and down upon the whole planet / a tender rain of Him falls / on every cow, ladle, leaf, human, ax handle, swing set. . . . I think . . . He wanted each of us . . . to have a tiny piece of Him."

I have also loved every poem in *Leavings*, by Wendell Berry. For a time I found myself alternating between reading Berry and reading Walter Brueggemann's *Journey to the Common Good*. A curious thing happened: in my mind, Berry and Brueggemann began to collaborate. I imagined them engaged in a long conversation on Berry's porch.

One of Brueggemann's consistent themes is the theological importance of poets and poetry. In his chapter "The Continuing Subversion of Alternative Possibility," he suggests that there is a "contest of narratives going on in our society." The same contest was evident to the prophets of Israel during the Solomonic empire. "The prophets were not great liberals," Brueggemann says. "They were, rather, poets outside the box, rooted in Sinai."

Berry's poem reads like a commentary on Brueggemann's point: "The nation is a boat . . . How troubling / now to ride it drifting / down the flow from the old / high vision of dignity, freedom." Remember Sinai, the prophets thundered at the Solomonic empire. Berry writes: "To save yourself . . . go back / upstream . . ."

One of Brueggemann's most helpful themes is the contrast between scarcity and abundance. We live, he says, with "anxious scarcity": we never think we have enough of anything; we always want more. But the Bible operates with the idea of abundance. There is enough. The story of the loaves and fishes is a paradigm of God's abundance, the saving antidote to the anxiety of scarcity.

Berry's commentary: the nation "Destroys its land, pollutes / Its streams" and "that market is a grave . . . The dear world sold and bought."

Recently I listened to the *Century's* poetry editor, Jill Peláez Baumgaertner, explain to a gathering of people who love words, and who use their own words to convey something of the divine Word, the importance of poetry. She noted that only a small percentage of *Century* readers say in surveys that they regularly read the magazine's poetry. But we publish poems because the work of poets is important. Over the years I have moved from the ranks of those too busy to read poetry to those who look for it. You might consider doing that too.