

Postcard Poems as Peace Process

“There can be no vulnerability without risk; there can be no community without vulnerability; there can be no peace, and ultimately no life, without community.”
- M. Scott Peck

It was the summer of 2007 and upon leaving a poetry critique circle when I said to a friend and participant, a fellow poet, that I wanted to “do something with postcards this summer.” She did not ask what I wanted to do, she simply said: “I’ll help.” I told her what I had in mind and she wrote up the first draft of a call for a poetry postcard project and it was something like this:

On or about July 27th, send postcards to the 3 people on the list below your name. (If you are near the bottom, send a card to anyone below you then start again at the top.) Ideally, you would write 3 different short poems -- remember they are being composed on a postcard and please keep your handwriting clear. (If you start with folks outside your country, you may want to start sending poems early...)

What to write? Something that relates to your sense of "place" however you interpret that, something about how you relate to the postcard image, what you see out the window, what you're reading, a dream you had that morning, or an image from it, etc. Like "real" postcards, get to something of the "here and now" when you write. Present tense is preferred... Do write original poems for the project. Taking old poems and using them is not what we have in mind. Letting a card linger for a while before you respond to the next person on your list is cool.

Oh and the poems were to be composed onto the card. That is, you get out a card and write onto it. Spontaneous, a brief glimpse into the mind of a stranger for one August moment. Like calligraphy. A risk. When focused on the luminous details, the concrete objects, the minute particulars, this is an

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exercise in perception and there are parallels with a Zen mode of existence. At its best this method is a reflection of one's Personal Mythology, which can be a useful notion in one's efforts toward individuation. Learning to cooperate with the language rather than use it, to paraphrase Robert Duncan. All these facets conspire to allow the practice to be a wisdom teacher.

We put the call out via our various literary communities, such as the SPLAB email list, SUNY Buffalo Poetics list and the WOMPO list of women poets. We started getting emails and the final list was over 100. We were stunned. There was great excitement and I would go on to write 128 postcard poems in 2007 alone as the excitement of the August Poetry Postcard Fest was such that, for a year, it was extended to a weekly practice, sending poetry postcards to folks who signed up for what became known as the "Perennial List."

We learned that many folks did not write spontaneously. One participant, in blatant disregard of the guidelines, wrote a poem in 31 sections for the fest and printed it out and cut it into hunks which were then glued to cards and mailed. When you look at the intended dialog part of the fest, the intention of seeing how such dialog could build a community, this person comes across as sort of a crazy person babbling in public into a cordless phone mic with no one on the other end of the "conversation." This process was too much risk for some people. And composing spontaneously is the hardest way to write. Michael McClure said:

To write spontaneously does not mean to write carelessly or without thought and deep experience. In fact, there must be a vision and a poetics that are alive and conscious... I do not know of a more adventurous gesture than to write spontaneously... When the poem is finished I listen to it...and see that it has a deeper consciousness and brighter thoughts than I was aware of while writing (xv).

Postcards for Peace

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And this gets me to how risk, an inherent part of building community, is related to how this August Poetry Postcard Fest has all these years been a peace-making effort. For in our culture, peace is seen as the absence of war and peace-making in the effort to stop or oppose war. But it is deeper than that. To oppose something only creates a dualism that strengthens what one opposes. The other side. You can crush the war effort, but it is the same consciousness as war itself. One must go to a deeper stance or be subject to what Einstein said, that being: “Sometimes two sides disagree because they are both wrong.” Or like the anti-war protestors who wanted a meeting with Mother Teresa and were told to come back when they were “pro-peace” activists.

That we were employing a lost art in the age of instant digital communications was a beautiful attempt to go against the tide and zig when most of society was zagging. Like the slow-food movement. Instant gratification just won't do. Slow down!

That most of the poems I received were awful was besides the point. That most people were trying, were making themselves vulnerable and were learning little by little how to be in the moment and let the language itself have its say was a victory and was, I believed, deepening their own consciousness. They were taking a risk, making themselves vulnerable.

The list in August 2013 grew to 302 people, with participants in: Alabama, Alberta, Arizona, Australia, British Columbia, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, France, Georgia, Germany, Hawaii, Illinois, India, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Mumbai, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Ontario, Oregon, Pakistan, Pennsylvania, Quebec, Singapore, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, United Kingdom, Virginia, Washington, Washington D.C., and Wisconsin.

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I look at that list and love how India comes between Illinois and Indiana and the assonance of the words themselves as they are together. And the music of Florida, France, Georgia, Germany, with two countries who, in one lifetime, were slitting each others throats. Now there are folks in those two countries sitting at their desks and jotting something personal, hopefully creative, imaginative, beautiful and inspiring, but at least sincere, to some stranger in a foreign land. For we Norte Americanos, at least it's a faraway state or province.

When you let in intuition guide you, magical things can happen as Charles Olson knew. A major 20th Century advocate for a spontaneous composing process, he said: "We do what we know before we know what we do." This is evocative of another 20th Century mystic, the Indonesian founder of Subud known as Bapak, who said: "Experience first, explanations afterward."

So, this is the explanation after 7 years of this festival and over 460 poetry postcards that I have sent out. It is an effort to learn about other cultures, to be creative and vulnerable. To reach out to strangers in a peaceful and imaginative way. To give them a sense of my August priorities which, this year were about, among other things: our p-patch community garden; dancing in the kitchen with my 17 month old daughter; and taking a Moroccan poet and Beat scholar to the top of a mountain in a nearby national park and expose him to some of the other beautiful things about life here.

Risk, vulnerability, community, peace was M. Scott Peck's recipe. All I added was creativity, as what is life without the imagination? As poet Diane diPrima said: "The only war that matters is the war against the imagination. All other wars are subsumed in it."

Won't you join us next August?

<http://poetrypostcards.blogspot.com/>

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Work Cited

McClure, Michael. *Three Poems*. New York, Penguin, 1995.