

## In a Nutshell

We all know what “in a nutshell” means. It means concise, terse, and parsimonious. It means to tell as much as you can as briefly as you can. In a nutshell it means a summary, a few words that stand for many.

I would like, in a nutshell, to lift up three characteristics of poetry – song, praise, and astonishment, represented by three of my favorite poets – Robert Frost, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Mary Oliver, respectively.

The author of a biography of Robert Frost, Jean Gould, chose to entitle her book Robert Frost: The Aim Was Song. Just read a few of his poems and note his effective use of rhythm and rhyme to produce a melodic sense and a pleasing musicality that one could call “song.” I need to say, I don’t know if this is what Ms. Gould meant by using “song” in her title, I just think it fits and that this is the way I make sense of it.

In his book, Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke, Robert Bly says, “...he had always believed that the greatest art includes praise, amounts to praise.” (p. 186) In his seventh sonnet to Orpheus, Rilke says in the first line, “To praise is the whole thing!” (p. 207)

For me, to praise means to recognize that the Creative Force that fashioned the earth and the universe is present in the most mundane of things. I recall another poem in which Rilke declares, “...praise the water jug...” as one of several common objects he would bring praise to. In this sense, praise is an affirmation, celebration, and thanksgiving.

The last characteristic of poetry that I want to mention is really a characteristic of the poet. In her collection of poems titled, Thirst, the poet, Mary Oliver, in the poem “Messenger,” says, “Let me keep my mind on what matters, which is my work, which is mostly standing still and learning to be astonished.” (p. 1) Astonishment, to me, is a combination of surprise and delight. It means allowing oneself to be captured by mystery and being open to discovery. In a nutshell, it means one must become as a child if one is to become a poet.

The characteristics of “song,” “praise,” and “astonishment” are important to our work and can greatly enrich our poetry. Paying attention to what the great poets pay attention to is a good plan!

And that, in a nutshell, is that!

Peace and Poetry,  
John

“In a Nutshell,” Copyright© 2014 by John D. Call