

A Literary Journey **By Steven Stone, Brooklyn, N.Y.**

MY experiences with literature, beginning in the seventh grade, were a bit frustrating. We began and ended with Shakespeare, and it seemed like everyone in the class understood what Shakespeare was saying except for me. For the most part, I concentrated on the sciences, a field that seemed to suit me from my earliest years. I began at The Bronx High School of Science in 1965, but oddly enough, my interest in the sciences began to wane. The class I remember most from that school was my creative writing class in 1966–67. From that time on, I felt highly motivated to write poetry, short stories, and later in college, newspaper articles for the Queens College Phoenix. I took poetry courses in college, and tried to improve. It nagged me that I wasn't as good as I would have liked to be, so I continued on. I was determined to prove, both to myself and the world, that given enough time, I could become a really outstanding poet.

My early efforts in writing were both thrilling and disappointing. Thrilling because I was embarking on uncharted waters and liked the possibilities; disappointing because my teacher had no idea how great I was, and graded me accordingly. There always seemed to be someone better, someone else getting the teacher's "apple award" for the week. I yearned to write well, and I promised myself never to give up, no matter what anyone said.

I was intrigued by this new interest of mine, and wrote intensively. I couldn't say that poetry was my favorite form of writing, but as the years went by, it became so.

WHEN I began practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism in 1970, my priority was overcoming my severe depression. I had no idea how my practice was going to impact my creative efforts. As I continued to practice, my depression lifted, my work took on a happier tone, and I was enjoying the results without seeking approval from others. Still, I concentrated mainly on developing emotional and spiritual stability. My creative work did not assume true significance until the late 1970s. By that time I was working in the real estate appraisal business supporting myself as an administrative assistant and appraisal coordinator. My writing assumed greater importance, as an oasis from the world of work, and a growing desire to truly excel and recapture the freshness of my earlier years and expand upon them emerged.

I was influenced by poets such as Dylan Thomas, Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound and e.e. cummings. Later on I gasped in admiration of Ann Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Gerard Manley Hopkins, W. B. Yeats, Shelley and Longfellow. There were so many outstanding poets, a bottomless supply of timeless verse. It was a little intimidating. I wondered if the really great poets ever had their doubts. I sent some of my poems to a poetry professor. We corresponded for a couple of years. He was unusually critical of my poems. It took a long time to swallow my pride and realize that at least some of the things he said about my poems were correct. I persevered on, through the good poems and the bad, the great and the mediocre. My greatest fear was not that I didn't have talent, but that I would fall short of greatness. I placed a heavy expectation on myself, but that was the way I was. I had to be great, and if I could not be great, it wasn't worth the effort.

There were lean years when I would write virtually nothing, and there were years

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when the flow seemed never to stop. I wrote all kinds of poems in all kinds of forms. I was pleased with my versatility. Although I couldn't avoid being influenced by the poets I read, I tried to heed the advice of Ralph Waldo Emerson that "envy is ignorance" and "imitation is suicide." I began to write more experimental verse, and found that a lot of this verse was pretty good work and could stand by itself. I was determined to make myself as good as I could be.

I kept an open mind. Sometimes I was inspired by reading other poets' work; at other times, a rare moment of relaxation in body and mind could set off a little "volcano" of creativity. I began to appreciate these little "volcanoes" that occurred every so often. Moments of poetic ambition and inspiration were rare jewels that I grasped with great pleasure and appreciation.

My literary odyssey was also a journey into my own life. I gradually realized that I didn't have to be great, or famous, or unusually talented in order to be creative, but just to do the best I could, to be honest with myself and my work, to write naturally, yet inventively. The greatness was all in the effort to create; fame didn't much matter; I stopped worrying about talent, and did the best I could with the ability I felt I had. My new positive, humane attitudes toward myself and my writing were bearing fruit. I was moving into a higher realm of expression; at the same time, a new "down-to-earthness" added immediacy and dimension to my work, and enabled me to find new audiences, people who could appreciate my work because I had finally begun to appreciate myself. No one is better or worse than I, nor am I better or worse than anybody else. We all have our equally precious lives to explore the essence of things, and my poems are an attempt in that direction.

I often wonder if many of the greatest poets might have gladly traded their fame and talent for the happiness they so often could not attain, and how seeking enlightenment through the worlds of Learning and Realization, and nothing higher left many a creative soul unsatisfied and ultimately unhappy. I am indeed grateful that I was able to win the struggle within myself by basing my life and efforts on chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to strengthen the core of my life, and at the same time develop my writing in a way most natural to me. I was practicing the highest philosophy of all, and had nothing to fear.

The poem "Hyacinths" is an attempt to get down to the bare bones of emotions that unfold in the course of the work. I chose this poem for presentation because it is relatively easy to read and disarmingly simple. It teaches no lesson, advances no theories, proposes no philosophies. Emotion sweeps through the delicate branches of the poem, infusing it with humanity. It is a form I have worked with from time to time to train myself. I try to convey my thoughts and feelings with great economy here, connecting each line with its predecessor and its descendant, a naturalistic fervor throughout.

I hope to eventually compile all my poems in a book of collected works, an idea inspired by Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and similarly comprehensive volumes of poetic work. I intend to improve further, combining poetic skill with a personal touch and great emotion throughout, poems that anyone can grasp and be inspired by. It's a great challenge, and I look forward to working on it.

My advice to poets, especially those just beginning, is to be honest with your thoughts and feelings, write what is in your heart. Techniques can always be worked on, styles can be developed anytime. Begin with what you know and what you feel. Go from there, and have confidence in your journey. It's a fascinating voyage of self-discovery, which is what all great literature should be. □

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HYACINTHS

Here, I give you
Hyacinths
A symbol of our
Love together
Gentle soil, so generous
in its deep dark wealth
Listen as the rain
Trickles toward the roots
They satisfy themselves
every tuber
every vein
till the season of the
Hyacinths comes
Their seeds
erupting slowly
Ounce by ounce
the fertile ground
Responds, the yielding
earth complies;
every petal
Rooted in the soil
Of delight
takes form; every leaf
re-forms
Every shade
of
 green
 (When we were young,
 I promised you
 Hyacinths some day
 Since then
 Our maturity
 Has warped us,
 Has twisted our resolve;
Still, there is a memory left
to remind us
 what may still be
 As I lay the
 hyacinths
 by the river,
 And pause to wait
 And then depart,

 Hoping you will come by
 and lift the
 still moist petals
Without scattering
a single

 one)

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ENRAPTURED

Enraptured by the sun day light
Rushing toward full fill ment

The stars and sky cleave to
each other

Like a sealed bowl
of earth's salad;

Sardineskin silver
Clouds
Against the

draw string
sun;
millions and millions
of tales
that thirst
to be told
under the
night sky
sweet violet
the stars
Like glistening grains

of salt white
against
the
deepening
dark
Chopped radish
sky pushing
out a morning
yellow of
scrambledegg
promise.

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