

In conversation with Mill Valley poet Jane Hirshfield

by Jacoba Charles

Poet Jane Hirshfield, a longtime resident of Marin, vividly overlays the depth of human emotion on a landscape of delicate observations. Her poems range from the spiritual to the political, exhibiting what reviewers have described as “a succinct wisdom”. Published in *The Nation* as a college student, Hirshfield spent eight years studying Zen before returning to a life of poetry. She now has published six books of poetry, one book of essays and three books of translations from Japanese. Hirshfield participated in the River of Words benefit at Toby’s Feed Barn on Friday, October 5, along with Robert Haas, Linda Pastan and Joyce Kouffman. Light reporter Jacoba Charles interviewed Hirshfield in her home last week.

Light: Where do you fit into a literary tradition?

Hirshfield: I actually wish that we didn’t put ourselves on labeled shelves as much as we do. For example, one of the troubles with being identified as a “Zen poet” is that my work never mentions Zen at all but peo-

ple who have strange ideas about it will put them on my poems.

Light: And yet many people call you a Californian poet.

Hirshfield: Well, of course Gary Snyder is a Californian poet, and of course Robertson Jeffers, who happened to have been born in Pennsylvania. Also Czeslaw Milosz who lived here for 40 years in exile from Poland and even Bertolt Brecht, who was in exile in Hollywood during the second world war, but probably not Robert Frost, who happened to be born in San Francisco.

To me, that is who a California poet is. Some were born here, some came here, some were here very briefly but wrote great poems about it. Very few of us are native stock, native plants. This landscape and this culture are wildly hybrid - and that’s what makes them open and alive. I really want a bouillabaisse community, the phrase “mongrel vigor”. My garden has a lot of California natives in it, but I want the

non-natives who belong here too.

You could also put me in a lineage of environmental poets; the natural world suffuses my poetry. I want the company of other creatures beyond the human world or the human point of view. That’s what poetry does: if you have an image of Mount Tam in a poem, or a bobcat in a poem, you can’t name those things without taking a little bit of their life and welcoming it into yours. You become part of one another in that moment of making a metaphor, making an image, describing a morning.

Light: How has the practice of Buddhism helped you on your path?

Hirshfield: My way of moving through the world, and through my life, is much more of a listening than a dictation. It’s waiting to see what might reveal itself and trying to keep the ego out of the way rather than let it dominate.

There’s a great deal of danger in idealizing Zen practice. It’s not about annihilation of the individual into some vague bliss state or great acceptance. You know suffering is inevitable and yet certain kinds of suffering are not acceptable; what’s happening in Burma today isn’t acceptable, so the Buddhist monks came out of their monasteries and put themselves in harms way. They were saying, “If you believe in compassion toward all being, *this is not right.*”

So that is something which comes out of the willingness to actually take a stand but to do so not in service of the personal ego. And for that we need practice - one just has to keep trying. There’s no such thing as permanent success.

I’m working on a lecture about a Japanese haiku poet, Basho, who says that a poem is only alive as long as it’s on the writing desk. As soon as the ink has dried it’s just another piece of paper.

Light: Do you have a regular writing practice?

Hirshfield: No, I’m the bad work-ethic poet (laughs). It sometimes feels that every other poet in America is writing a poem every day now. But if I don’t have anything that needs saying through me, I write so horribly, as Emily Dickenson said, “it would embarrass my dog.” My dog’s been dead for some years now, and she would still be embarrassed.

Light: Do you make up for that in other ways?

Hirshfield: There was a very good piece I once heard, which said, “it might not be possible to write every day, but its possible to do something every day that sustains the life of poetry.” That might be reading a poem, it might be noticing something, it might be meditating, it might be having a slightly more honest and deep connection with whoever you’re talking to than one could have had; it might be turning toward

the difficult.

Its as if I have two different lives. There’s the life that the poetry comes from, which is at home: quiet, extraordinarily introverted, extraordinarily private and solitary. Then there’s the life which that has, very ironically, brought me to: standing in front of 100 or 600 or 3000 people, saying the poems and being available. It’s strange to me how the life of poetry demanded that I learn to balance my basic nature.

Light: How has that challenge of public speaking and being on the road has informed your poetry?

Hirshfield: Anything that expands the life has to expand the poems. With me it’s not necessarily direct and immediate. For example, in May I was invited to join a very small group of American writers on an amazing trip to the Middle East. We met with university students and a very odd assortment of other people including the grand mufti of Syria and also the baklava king of Istanbul.

It was a remarkable thing to be permitted to do and I know it’s changed me, but it’s not like I came home and started writing poems directly about the experience.

In six years maybe some crushed pistachios will show up in a poem, and that will go back to this trip.

Light: What struck you most about that trip?

Hirshfield: When you travel on the highway between Aleppo and Damascus and you go by a highway sign for Baghdad. Just as if it were, you know, Sacramento between San Francisco and LA.

I saw that sign and I wanted to weep because it might as well have been labeled “this way to hell” - and it looked so ordinary. It looked so normal. It’s just a highway turnoff, like any other in our civilized world.

Light: Where do you fit in with the general culture of America?

Hirshfield: I don’t think anyone becomes a poet because they fit comfortably into mainstream American consumerist society. I think people are drawn to poetry because they are skeptical, they want something more.

I almost hate saying that because it assumes that there is anybody who is really comfortable and happy with a K-mart life. Everybody has a child who’s died, or...tragedy is absolutely egalitarian. It visits every life and I don’t think that anybody escapes without feeling that it has asked them for more wisdom than they have, for more capacity for feeling than they have, and what do you do? You struggle.

One of my poems ends with the line, “the world asks of us only the strength that we have, and we give it. Then it asks more, and we give it.”



Poet Jane Hirshfield read at Point Reyes Books on Friday. Photo by J Charles.