



## **OUR INTERVIEW WITH POET**

### **JOE O CALLAGHAN**



Whenever I write or read a poem, I feel closure  
to my authentic self which allows me to love the world  
and those in it more deeply.  
Yes, poetry cultivates empathy and compassion!!

# Seeing with the Eye of the Heart



**Sally:** Thanks for joining us on the **Poetry Page**, Joe. I am really excited because— though I selected you for the Poetry Page based on your lovely poem, “Delight,” in our 2019 **Art & Text** booklet— I have since reread your biography, and find there is going to be so much to talk about!

## **Delight**

I walk back into the house after a workout  
grind beans and pour water into the coffee pot  
stroll out into the crisp early morning  
the summer heat has finally broken  
there is a little chill

A bee is buzzing from flower to flower  
pulsing and scurrying around  
curiosity and delight seem to envelop  
her as I open the garden gate

Chipmunks dart across the lawn  
reminding me that the grass needs to be mowed  
the chill in the air feels a little bit like fall  
will be here soon

I look back towards the house  
all that I love in the world is asleep inside  
I know this garden will die and this moment will drift away  
but for now I am overcome with delight

Joe O Callaghan



Please tell us about your career in social work, spirituality, and grief counseling. (I'm sure your work in these areas has intensified during COVID.)

**Joe:** Hi Sally, Thanks so much for reaching out to me. I am honored to be included on the Library's Poetry Page. I have always been a person who works in the world of service and that has included social work (mostly in public schools), and grief work (in my private practice), all of which has been informed by my spiritual life and work. I am a Christian, and that faith has informed my desire to be of service to others. Of course, you are correct that COVID has intensified some of this work; it is also shaping how I do my work.

**Sally:** In your bio for our Art & Text booklet, you write "As Joe's interest in contemplative practices grew, he discovered a long hidden desire to write poetry." And you state that you wrote your first—pretty bad— poem at age 40! Please elaborate!

**Joe:** About 15 years ago, I became interested in contemplative practices (meditation, mindfulness, yoga, etc). This interest also led me to look at my own faith tradition to see what— if any— meditative/contemplative tradition there is in Christianity. To my delight, I discovered a very rich contemplative tradition that for the most part has been kept out of the mainstream, and is mostly practiced in the monastery by the monks. I began to look deeply at this tradition, partly because— as I became more broadly interested in these practices— I hoped to go deeper into my own tradition. This led to practices like centering prayer, and lectio divina (holy reading).



One of the aspects of contemplative practice that has been most important for me is the practice of deep listening. It is about listening to your own

internal life, listening to those around you, listening to the world and, of course, listening for God in your life.

This opened up a whole new level of spirituality for me that allowed me to be still and quiet (not skills I was known for). It opened up a whole new way of looking at— and listening to— the world.

One night, in the beginning of my contemplative journey, I was home sitting in front of the Christmas tree when a poem about “waiting” just fell out of my head into a pen! I was very surprised and happy. I had never written a poem before, and really didn’t even relate to poetry— but there it was on the page!

**Sally:** Thanks for sharing that story of your journey. So inspiring!



After you wrote your first poem, did you find yourself just naturally continuing to write? At that time, did you seek any guidance through education or workshops on craft, etc.? Or did poetry begin coming naturally to you, and you just followed its lead?

**Joe:** After I wrote my first poem, they started to come fast and furious. Mostly they came after my practice of sitting in the silence for a while. I wrote and wrote and wrote. I also felt like a fraud since I never wrote poems before, and really didn’t even like poetry. I kept at it, and I think I have written some good poems. I have not done any formal training; in part, because of time, and also probably out of fear that I am no good at this and will be found out! I am now at a place where I am interested in having a mentor to work on the craft of poetry with me. Even today after writing about 125 poems, they almost always come when I am listening deeply and attentive to the world around me! Poetry— like all contemplative practice— requires listening, and, as Mary Oliver says, “attention to the world.”

**Sally:** Do you have a favorite poet or two? Who are they, and why?

**Joe:** Wow! Since I started writing poetry, I started reading poets, of course! I have so many poets that I love and admire, and I discover new poets all the time!

My favorites today include: Seamus Heaney, Marilyn Nelson, Ada Limon, Rainer Maria Rilke, Padraig O Tuama,



These folks are my favorites (today) for all kinds of reasons: mostly each one of them speaks to me, and to my deep desire to live an authentic, whole life. Seamus Heaney, the famous Irish poet, has so many poems about the earth of his Ireland that connect me to my own Irish roots. Marilyn Nelson is a storytelling poet, and I love a good story. Padraig O Tuama is a beautiful Irish poet, a little younger than me, that I admire for his openness and willingness to reveal himself. Ada Limon just writes great poems; her poem “How To Triumph Like a Girl” filled me with delight, and I immediately sent it to my daughter! Rilke helps me find my way to the deepest parts of myself, and his poems say something that I hope to say about my own experiences. There are many more, but that will have to do.

**Sally:** I, too, admire Seamus Heaney—especially his first book, *Death of a Naturalist* (I did a paper on it in graduate school). And I love how you shared that Limon poem with your daughter! What are your favorite poems?

**Joe:** Another BIG question! I have many, many. Here are a few: Heaney’s “Postscript,” Heaney’s “St. Kevin and the Blackbird,” Padraig O Tuama’s “Pedagogy of Conflict,” Antonio Machado’s “Caminante, No Hay Camino / Traveler, There Is No Road,” Mary Oliver’s “I Happen to be Standing.” I could go on all day! What about the lovely little poem by Nikki Giovanni called “Mercy!!”



**Sally:** Nikki Giovanni was a favorite of mine as a young girl; I remember loving her poem “Mothers.” From what you say about coming to poetry later in life, it doesn’t sound like you spent time with it in childhood?

**Joe:** I never cared about or was interested in poetry until my middle years. Though, in thinking about it, I realize that I have always loved language—stories, in particular. Not reading them so much as listening to them—that

has always fascinated me. I think that is why I got into social work, and grief work. It is an opportunity— and a privilege— to listen to another’s story.

**Sally:** You must be a great listener. A rare quality in a fast-paced world.

Do you feel poetry elicits empathy? I know a poet who is a medical doctor, and teaches medicine. He holds poetry classes with his medical students because he feels it helps them “see” their patients on a human level (something, he says, they don’t generally teach in medical school!). The social and spiritual work you do with people must require so much empathy and insight, I feel poetry must really help you there. And the insight required for your work in social work, and counseling, etc., must in turn deepen your own poetry. Please share your thoughts on this!

**Joe:** Poetry has helped me in countless ways to deepen my ability for compassion for myself, others, and our world. Poetry, for me, is a way to express what it means to be human in this complex, and often scary, world. Whenever I write or read a poem, I feel closure to my authentic self which allows me to love the world and those in it more deeply. Yes, poetry cultivates empathy and compassion!!



**Sally:** Yes, the authentic self. I think that is the real beauty of a true poem: it reveals this. Do you utilize poetry at all when professionally counseling individuals?

**Joe:** I do. Especially when I facilitate retreats. Of course, retreats— whether they are for a morning or a week— offer a space of time in which to step away, and to see with the eye of the heart. Poems help to bring people into that space.

**Sally:** “The eye of the heart!” So true.

As a poet, do you concentrate on publishing? Have you a collection, or can we find your poems in literary magazines?

**Joe:** I have only published one poem in an online journal. I would like to publish, but have not really focused on learning about that process. If any of your readers would like to point me in the right direction— I will take it!

**Sally:** Okay, readers! Please let us know if you have any advice for Joe on that topic!

Joe, please add anything else you wish to say!! We are delighted to have you here!

**Joe:** This has been really fun for me. As middle-aged poet who has had no training, I often feel fraudulent, and that I should keep my poems to myself. Opportunities like this really help to pull me out of my comfort zone. Thank you for that!



Coincidentally, my friend **Yvonne Marchese** just interviewed me for her podcast, **Late Bloomer Living**. We talk about the contemplative life and poetry. It is a long episode, but maybe one or two of your readers might be interested:



[LATE BLOOMER LIVING!](#)

Sally: Thanks, Joe!!



Joe and his family!

Now, for a selection of Joe's poetry...



### **The labyrinth in the middle of the church graveyard during a pandemic**

I tried to sit in the stillness this morning  
It is hard to sit still when you are forced to stay put  
I made a fire, listened for the birds, bowed my body a little in prayer  
I walked and walked to the church with the graveyard with the labyrinth  
First I walked through rows of old tombs  
hoping this moment passes over me (us)  
Well to be honest I was thinking about me.  
Fear can grip us with the “I”  
I moved on to the “we”  
hoping that we won’t find ourselves  
nearer to the grave.  
I walked through the graves  
reaching out, touching some  
Admiring the little blue flowers spread over this church yard.  
I don’t know their name, I wish I did  
I would like to know more about this world we call home  
I walked through graves careful not to disturb  
old grey stones that flash with sliver when the sun is just right  
I walked the labyrinth round and round to the center  
Following my shadow as I turned away from the sun  
At every turn I stopped to pray for salvation.

Joe O Callaghan



## Gluttony (the good kind)

The Rose of Sharon is in full bloom  
Awake and open for business!  
A bumble bee, who is much too skinny for August, rummages around the flower  
Completely drenched in pollen  
So thick that you barely notice the bee If not for her constant movement  
I think to myself  
What a glutton!  
But she is a glutton in that  
Gorgeous way  
a baby is covered in apple sauce  
in the high chair  
Laughing and slapping the table as she stuffs her mouth full  
Her mother belly laughing with delight  
The way someone who just  
finished a race drinks their water  
Pours it over their head desperate to cool down and replenish  
But also oh so satisfied with themselves  
The way a dog tears at the bone  
You just gave him  
Like it is the first time and he is not sure you won't try and take it back  
The way a grandpa and his granddaughter share a chocolate ice cream cone  
Sitting sweetly on a bench the little one with chocolate all over her mouth enthralled by  
her  
Choice and the old man his arms wrapped around her enthralled by her  
The way some people eat corn of the cob with purpose digging their teeth in cleaning  
each row  
as if they are plowing the field  
Knowing full well they will need to floss  
Gluttony in a good way  
Savoring and loving with gusto  
Of course we should not be gluttons for food or other things that make us greedy  
But maybe the world would feel better if we were all gluttons for each other!

Joe O Callaghan



## St. Kevin, Seamus and Me

Sometimes I pray,  
like St. Kevin and his blackbird.  
I stretch out my hands in prayer,  
hoping for a landing.

Kevin, open to the eternal,  
a thousand times putting his  
hand out the window, letting go.  
Waiting for the bird to come and rest.

I too, sometimes wait.  
I try, too, to lose myself in prayer,  
letting the bird land in my open hand.  
Self-forgetful, eternal.

Imagining myself  
a man of prayer,  
a monk here in this house.  
Living in this cell.

A cell that feels small,  
too many people, too many responsibilities,  
not enough windows, not enough blackbirds,  
Never enough time...

For the self-forgetful, eternal.

Kevin and I find each other over the centuries,  
across the ocean, living together,  
in Seamus' poem and in our prayers.  
Listening for the monastery bell.

The blackbird lands because his arms  
are outstretched, his hand is open.  
I too can stretch and let myself be open,  
my body a prayer, waiting for the landing in my open hand.

Joe O Callaghan

