

*The Spirit behind a Beautiful Journey*  
*The Music and Poetry of Joy Harjo*

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“We read in your introduction to your book that poetry and the creation story are intimately connected. I was really interested in this idea, and I wanted to know if you could explain where this idea comes from. And along those lines, what effect does poetry have on creation and the path that creation is on?” I asked this question at a poetry reading by Joy Harjo. I had read one book of poems by her, *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*, for a class I was taking, and we had just read the introduction to her book *How We Became Human*. I felt a deep and powerful connection toward her words in the introduction to her book. I felt these words came less from a place of intellect and more from a place of spiritual understanding. They were words from the heart, a heart that felt truth beating in each word. With this connection, I asked this question. From the little exposure I had with Joy’s work at the time, I knew this was a question she explored in her work. After reading much of her work since, it reappears in many forms. Yet I did not get the answer I expected. Joy responded, “Well, I’d have to think about that one for a while.” She then decided to gently turn the question back. “What do you guys think?” She looked at me, but I soundly realized that though I felt this idea ring truly within me, I did not know how to properly put it into words. So, I just smiled with a sort of I-don’t-know-look on my face. She was kind enough to direct the question at everyone when she saw I did not have a response. Someone then gave an answer that sort of veered from the question, while posing another. Joy responded to this, but then returned to my question. “It’s a good question. But it’s one that I’ll have to think about, and it’s been a long, hot day, and I’m just running out of steam for the night.” While I was first

puzzled by Joy's response, I now feel I sense an understanding of why she did not provide an answer that night. The answer to this question flows not only in the very poetry of Harjo, but it flows within her poetic and musical process. The spirit of poetry and music made by Joy Harjo guides the listener to feel that poetry does not rest in providing answers; poetry guides the listener toward answers; poetry guides the listener in the journey of learning how to become human.

Harjo's poetry, while spiritual, deemphasizes the sort of "prophetic" overtones that give answers in favor of acting as a guide toward how we seek those deep answers. In her book, *How We Became Human*, Harjo describes a time when she felt her life was at a crossroads: "I was being asked a question, and I have an innate aversion to being asked questions... Would I continue toward enlightenment or would I veer off? I was at a proverbial crossroads" (xxiv). This Harjo, at crossroads, longs to know her journey. She longs to know its path and whether it will reach its destination. Perhaps the reason for Harjo's aversion to the question is not the question, but push for an immediate answer. In her work and even within this experience, Harjo speaks not of answers, but of processes, of journeys, of *how* one becomes human. She celebrates the journey, the crossroads, the turns in the road, and the *how* of how we become who we are. While at the poetry reading I attended, Harjo was talking about the way poetry is taught in schools. She explained how it was funny that when you listened to song, what matters to you most is how it sounds. You don't worry so much about what it means. But in schools she said, we're often asked to examine *what does the poem mean?* when we should be exploring *how does the poem mean?*

The story of how Harjo became a poet is worth mentioning, as her journey turns from typical convention. For much of her life, Harjo never seriously considered pursuing poetry as a profession. Rather, before she turned to poetry, Harjo was an artist and a struggling mother. Harjo speaks of her journey in life during times when reading the poetry of others sustained her:

Until then, writing poetry had not been an option, especially as a career, an occupation, a journey for life. Riding bulls was a possibility, being a car mechanic or sheet-metal worker like my father, a tribal chief like my grandfather, a cook and waitress like my mother or even a painter, like my aunt and grandmother. Becoming a wife and a mother was primary, a career was something that happened at divorce for my mother's relatives who were poor. My grandmother and aunt had the option to be artists because oil was discovered on their allotted lands. They had options that weren't available for my mother. Until then, becoming a poet was no longer the sole territory of white people from the northeast United States and Europe. (*How We Became Human*, xxii)

Harjo approaches poetry from a place most renowned poets do not come from. While she speaks of *becoming* a wife, a mother, or poet, Harjo's life comes from a place that shares with many other women, mothers, and even men what it means to *be* human. This *being* comes from a place of "struggle" (xxi), a place that questions "what am I in this place of loss and heartbreak? How do I bear the weight of my soul?" (xxi) This idea brings us to wonder the difference between *being* human and *becoming* human. Within Harjo's words comes the suggestion that *being* human is something that rests in one place. This is a place of weight, stagnation, loss, heartbreak, and obscurity, a place where life's weight holds us down from seeing the whole journey and the whole process.

Harjo feels that the most honorable task of poetry lies in learning to walk this journey gracefully. She says of the poetry of Richard Hugo: "his poetry taught me that becoming human was the most honorable task of poetry" (*HWBH*, xx). Harjo reveals that

her desire to walk gracefully, to speak, and to hear gave birth to her love in partaking in this most honorable task:

It started here, with a glimmer, a thought, the need to speak, with an impulse fed by history, dream, myth (that is, myth as an archetypal reality, not as falsehood), belief, and most of all faith. This poetry made roots from the compelling need to speak, to hear, to walk gracefully from one century to next—despite the lines at the food stamp office, changing diapers, writing papers for classes, organizing for political action—without the luxury of a wife, a washer and dryer, a cook or nanny or a known library of publications by Indian writers. (*HWBH*, xx)

The image of walking reappears beautifully elsewhere in Harjo's poetry. In this passage, the image suggests a sense of composure, a sense of purpose amidst all the distractions and necessities of being human. This sense of purpose gives rise to the ability to walk gracefully from one era into the next, to walk gracefully within this creation.

Just as her burgeoning love for poetry came from this desire to walk gracefully, Harjo gracefully connects all human poetry, and even all art, to the purpose of creation. Harjo reveals in her introduction, "In the Mvskoke [Harjo's tribe] world women are accepted as painters, artists. To make art (whether it be painting, drawing, songs, stories—any art) is to replicate the purpose of creation" (*HWBH*, xviii). In Harjo's eyes, art and the creating of art connect us to the very intent of this creation. Art not only gives, but recreates that initial intention behind the source of this world.

However, somewhere along the way, Harjo suggests we human beings lose a sense of connection with this purpose as separation emerges. Harjo speaks of this separateness in contrast to the poetic spirit of connectedness in many of her works and interviews, but I will focus on her words on the images of women and strength in her work. In an interview with Joseph Bruchac in the book *The Spiral of Memory*, Harjo

explains the image of women in her work in contrast to the typical portrayals by Anglo writers: “I think they’re different. I think they teach an androgynous kind of spirit where they are very strong people. They’re very strong people, and yet to be strong does not mean to be male, to be strong does not mean to lose femininity, which is what the dominant culture has taught. We’re human beings” (*TSoM*, 28). Harjo does not see women as cast within the bounds of conventional norms. At the same time, she does not deemphasize strength, nor ignore femininity. Rather, Harjo embraces a spirit that comes from androgyny, a place in which the distinctions between male and female, men and women, disappear. The strength and femininity flowing within these people creates Harjo’s understanding of what it means to be a human being.

Harjo extends the need to embrace interconnectedness as a way to see poetry and its relationship with the world. She explains in her introduction, “There is no separation between poetry, the stories and events that link them, or the music that holds all together, just as there is no separation between human, animal, plant, sky, and earth” (*HWBH*, xxvi). Poetry and the poet, the poet and the beloved, the beloved and the earth, the earth and its stories, all find themselves connected, completely free of separation.

This embracing of liberation from separation manifests in Harjo’s beliefs and performance of poetry and music. Harjo eloquently describes the relationship between poetry and music as she recalls beginning to revel in the saxophone:

The horn could laugh, could cry in a direct, physical manner. Poetry and music belonged together. This was not new as poetry and music have been together since the invention of poetry and music. They are soul mates, not meant to be parted. It is only in the modern age they were separated: when the printing press was invented, when the self-appointed keepers of the sacred pronounced the body was not the house of the spirit. Most of the world’s literature is still oral, not written. (*HWBH*, xxv)

This philosophy of poetry and music as soul mates manifests in her albums and poetry readings. She has several CDs. Some like *She Had Some Horses* are her reading solo, but even within this album she often breaks into a gentle song or hymn. Other albums take on a more overtly musical overtone. *Letter from the End of the Twentieth Century* is a recording with her band, *Poetic Justice*, in which the group mixes everything from tribal chants, to saxophone, to electric sounds, to Joy's reading and singing. In the reading I attended, Joy would move, without any introduction, from the reading of one poem to playing solo on the tenor saxophone. As I listened to her play the tenor in a strong stream of vibrato, I could feel the same breath that I just heard reading poems now flowing through the saxophone.

The music of jazz, interestingly, not only pervades Harjo's performance, but it best captures the relationship between poetry and the sacred experience of this creation. In an interview with Carol H. Grimes, Harjo tells the story of one of her first experiences of poetry and jazz:

Well, I have a really great love of music, and I love the saxophone. One of my earliest memories of what I would call poetry is standing in the back seat of the car and being so small that the top of my head reached the top of the back seat. I had to stand on my tiptoes to look over the seat. There was a jazz band with a trumpet, and I remember very consciously trying to follow that sound and loving the trail that it made and following it to the source of itself, which was undefinable. (*TSoM*, 89)

Within this simple musical description beautifully lies the image of following one's path toward its source. It is a musical microcosm of the path of creation and the source from which everything springs. It is a looking back and tracing the trail back to the origin, back to the undefinable. When the interviewer follows up and asks, "You had a visual

sense of doing that?” Harjo responds, “Yes, very visual, a sense even more visual, of following it with my whole self” (*TSoM*, 89). Harjo emphasizes that the experience of this source encompasses not just one sense, but a composite of all senses, an entirety of the self.

This idea of experiencing an entirety of composites as one experience becomes the heart of Harjo’s conception of poetry, music, and jazz. We can now view our journey as a composite of turns, points of stagnation, veers, direction, and graceful composure. Harjo guides us to experience all of these composites as one beautiful journey. This understanding, for Harjo, flows beautifully into her conception of jazz. She describes a turning point in her life, a looking back in the early eighties:

Of course, I didn’t understand the consequences of my choice until seven years later, when I looked out over the wreckage and saw the gleam of hard-won knowledge. This has everything to do with poetry, which is the making of songs for ceremonial or secular use. It’s all sacred. Every wrong turn is eventually a right turn. It was the poetry of jazz during the mid-eighties that gave me the saxophone so I could sing my way through the mess... (*HWBH*, xxv)

The creation of jazz beautifully reflects the spirit of life’s journey. Jazz is built on a sense of improvisation, and any musician who has tempted to become a jazz musician knows what comes along the way. As a musician learns to improvise, he must learn to respond to the slips, the occasional mistakes. As a musician learns to become a jazz musician, she learns how to embrace those “mistakes”, those veers from path she had in mind. Ultimately, he builds off of everything that trails out of his horn. Ultimately, she experiences the entirety of music she creates.

Harjo expresses the beauty of this process in her poem to the jazz saxophonist, Jim Pepper, titled *The Place the Musician Became a Bear*. Four central lines read:

*Our souls imitate lights in the Milky Way. We've always known where to go to become ourselves again in the human comedy.  
It's the how that baffles. A saxophone can complicate things.  
You knew this, as do all musicians when the walk becomes a necessary dance to fuel the fool heart.  
Or the single complicated human becomes a wave of humanness and forgets to be ashamed of making the wrong step.*  
(*The Woman Who Fell From the Sky*, 51)

For Harjo the *how* beats within the heart of music, the heart of poetry. Learning to play the saxophone complicates things, just as learning to play the role of the human who waits in line at the food stamp office, changes diapers, writes papers, and organizes for political action also complicates things. But all who become musicians learn *how*. When the fool heart turns an unexpected turn, the musician learns how to turn the graceful walk into a necessary dance. The musician learns how to play with a full heart. He learns how to release the fear of the wrong step. She learns how to create music out of every step she has taken. He learns how to become a musician. She learns how to become human.

#### *Works Cited*

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