

Praise song for the day – interpretation

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Praise Song For The Day November 26, 2012 This poem, Praise Song for the Day by Elizabeth Alexander, is one of the most memorable poems that have been recited within the last 20 years. Immediately after President Obama was sworn into office, Elizabeth Alexander recited her poem to the masses that had gathered on that cold winter day in January. The piece is full of symbolism, with the tone being hopeful, inspiring and thankful.

The poem begins with a description of daily life which is filled with the daily grind of hard working individuals, often doing the work that drives this great nation of ours...small businesses, blue-collar laborers, honorable professions such as teaching. The possibility of coming together as a people in spite of our differences is expressed in terms of our words ("spiny or smooth...words to consider, reconsider"). From will to words to concrete results (e. g. , highways), we interact with each other—past and present.

The boundary of a highway may inspire someone today to go further and see what else is possible, keeping hopeful aspirations alive by "see(ing) what's on the other side. At the same time that we fear the uncertainties of the future (which also divides us), we can envision it in terms of its possibilities ("We need to find a place where we are safe; We walk into that which we cannot yet see"). I think she is trying to say that we should also honor the sacrifices of poor, immigrant laborers of the past who made our present reality possible as well as the modern immigrant laborers who continue to build upon the dreams of their ancestors. "Say it plain, that many have died for this day. Sing the names of the dead who brought us here, who laid the train tracks, raised the bridges, picked the cotton and the lettuce, built brick by brick the glittering edifices they would then keep clean and work inside

of") The resolution of conflicts between people has many routes. For families it may be "figuring it out at kitchen tables" while other conflicts require political movements, struggle, and protest. This poem is a song of praise for such peaceful resolutions and for this historical inaugural day which would not have been possible without the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

The religious belief systems of different peoples that allow us to get along with other peoples differ in degree. The poem presents an even stronger concept of love that goes beyond "Love thy neighbor as thy self", and even beyond "marital, filial, national." Some believe the way to unity is to avoid being selfish, not hurting others, and treating others as you would your compatriots, your kin, or yourself. This poem suggests there is a love that extends beyond those whom we are familiar with to include "a widening pool of light. Finally, in relation to the present day, there is a sense of the immense possibilities ("anything can be made, any sentence begun"). This is contained in the words that may inspire others to action that may bring such a love closer toward reality. From disunity ("walking past each other") to blindly "walk[ing] into that which we cannot yet see," this poem now suggests the alternative of "walking forward in that light" guided by a new vision of a love that may unite us. I focused on the symbolic element of the poem, because I liked the presentation and how it flowed.

It made me think about how far we've come in this country. I believe that Elizabeth draws the reader into the poem just I was drawn, by suggesting that we as a nation that was literally built off the labor of slave labor and indentured servants, has evolved into a country that elected its first African-American President. Each day we go about our business, walking past each

other, catching each other's eyes or not, about to speak or speaking. All about us is noise. All about us is noise and bramble, thorn and din, each one of our ancestors on our tongues.

Someone is stitching up a hem, darning a hole in a uniform, patching a tire, repairing the things in need of repair. Someone is trying to makemusicsomewhere, with a pair of wooden spoons on an oil drum, with cello, boom box, harmonica, voice. A woman and her son wait for the bus. A farmer considers the changing sky. A teachersays, Take out your pencils. Begin. We encounter each other in words, words spiny or smooth, whispered or declaimed, words to consider, reconsider. We cross dirt roads and highways that mark the will of some one and then others, who said

I need to see what's on the other side. I know there's something better down the road. We need to find a place where we are safe. We walk into that which we cannot yet see. Say it plain: that many have died for this day. Sing the names of the dead who brought us here, who laid the train tracks, raised the bridges, picked the cotton and the lettuce, built brick by brick the glittering edifices they would then keep clean and work inside of. Praise song for struggle, praise song for the day. Praise song for every hand-lettered sign, the figuring-it-out at kitchen tables.

Some live by love thy neighbor as thyself, others by first do no harm or take no more than you need. What if the mightiest word is love? Love beyond marital, filial, national, love that casts a widening pool of light, love with no need to pre-empt grievance. In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air, any thing can be made, any sentence begun. On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp, praise song for walking forward in that light. Alexander, E. (2009, Feb).

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