

Ellen Jane Powers

Book Review: ten poems to change your life by Roger Housden

Edith Wharton once said, "If only we'd stop trying to be happy, we could have a pretty good time." Considering the plethora of self-help books, she has a point. According to Parapublishing.com, in 1998 self-help books accounted for one in ten titles sold, and a 2005 Marketdata Enterprises, Inc. report claims that \$693 million of self-help books sold that year and have an expected annual growth rate of 8.3% through 2010, which is greater than publishing as a whole. Sales of poetry books didn't make the report. However, self-help now includes poetry! There in the poetry section of my local bookstore, prominently displayed, was an anthology of poems labeled "self-help/inspirational". And that's what Roger Housden's book, *ten poems to change your life*, is – self-help and inspirational. Self-help, because he feels the poems and his accompanying reflections, which includes his personal story, can help readers change in some way. Inspirational, because he provides anecdotes from a wide range of spiritual literature and poetry. By choosing poems that, for him, represent key life moments, he's providing catalysts for awakening or inspirations for opening the heart, a theme repeated throughout the book and the title of one of his subsequent books.

The self-help industry is built on the premise that acting less as a stranger and more as a friend changes us, especially if the "friend" presumes to know what you might be thinking or feeling. Housden, though, is at his best when he's not acting as a friend, but is instead providing material for inspiration, such as relating tales from the spiritual traditions of both East and West and weaving in details of his life that led to his own spiritual growth. I found myself squawking at him where he

falls back into self-help mode, addressing the reader as "you" and presuming to know how I, the reader, feels, or what I might be experiencing in my life or in reaction to the poems. Given that this is Housden's first book of four with the title *ten poems to ...*, I can only presume his enthusiasm to help others got the better of him.

Some of my favorite poets – Mary Oliver, Machado, Whitman, Rumi, Kabir, Neruda – are in this volume, as well as many others worthies – Galway Kinnell, W.S. Merwin, Derek Walcott, and St. John of the Cross. Readers should be forewarned that several poems are erotic and/or sensual in nature: excerpts from Whitman's "Song of Myself," Galway Kinnell's poem "Last Gods," and the excerpt from "The Dark Night" by St. John of the Cross. In justifying their inclusion, Housden likens Whitman's verse to the mystical tradition of the Bible's Song of Songs (also known as The Song of Solomon), and includes Kinnell's poem because he believes we live "in one of the most disembodied and anti-sensual cultures of all times." St. John is included to convey the sense of "longing and belonging", the notion that the Beloved is the Self. It would appear that one of the goals of the book is to rid readers of bodily shame. To be alive is to be in the body, to be in the world, and, more importantly, to be "a willing participant in this world." Housden seems to share Keat's view that the world is "the vale of soul-making." And this then would explain why Neruda's "Ode to My Socks" is included:

They were
so beautiful
that for the first time

my feet seemed to me
unacceptable
like two decrepit
firemen, firemen
unworthy
of that embroidered
fire,
of those luminous
socks.

Robert Bly keenly translates the refrain from Machado's "Last Night As I Was Sleeping" as *marvelous error*. The original Spanish, *bendita ilusión*, literally means *blessed illusion*, and the author points out that Bly, by translating it as he did, avoids the sense of "worthlessness" inherent in illusions. Although it is not clear from the poem itself that the narrator of the poem believes the illusions to be true, Housden uses them to show how we are joined "to the life of the world, even if you have not known or felt it":

Last night as I was sleeping,
I dreamt – marvelous error! –
that a spring was breaking
out in my heart.

The origin of that spring, Housden declares, is "not in your own heart". One could also look at it as the realization of John 7:38, "out of your heart shall flow rivers of living water." Being alive, in both body and spirit, depends on the heart, which is why, no doubt, Housden makes mention of the heart in nearly all of his reflections. And what a marvelous "error" indeed, to find "that it was God I had / here inside my heart."

If being true to the still small voice within (Oliver), viewing the heart as the source of life (Machado), being in communion with all living things (Whitman), surrendering to beauty and kindness (Rumi), living in the moment (Kabir),

celebrating the material world (Neruda), and embracing the sensual life (Kinnell) is not enough to "open a door in the heart," then perhaps realizing one's mortality might. The eighth poem, Merwin's "For The Anniversary Of My Death", reveals to readers the poet's realization that he bears witness to the day of his death each year:

Every year without knowing it
I have passed the day
When the last fires will wave to me
And the silence will set out
Tireless traveler
Like the beam of a lightless star.

Housden makes the point that the "potency of images lies in their ability to shape us." By pondering a poem such as Merwin's in the months, even years, ahead, the reflections may resonate with some future self, enough so as to "wake us up into a fuller life."

In the Jewish mystical tradition known as Kabbalah, Creation occurred because "Face wished to behold Face", that is, God wanted to see God. Housden's reflections support that viewpoint that God is in all things, including us. And he uses the chosen poems to ask if we, the readers, are awake to all that. If not, the imperative he leaves us with is that "great poetry can alter the way we see ourselves" and this is "a dangerous practice; dangerous because you may never be the same again."

So, I see in the front matter of the book the author's list of titles, among which is "Seven Sins in a Life Worth Living," and wonder how he might have transformed the seven deadly sins into heavenly virtues. As tempting as it is (pun intended) to read that book, I don't need another self-help book to open my heart to life. Albert Einstein said it well, "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle." Marvelous error, indeed!