

## An interview with Ron Starbuck, poet/author, and publisher.

Aparna Mukhedkar

### [Wheels Turning Inward](#)

*New and Selected Poems*

FreisenPress

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1. What inspired you to write this collection of spiritual poems?

These poems are simply a reflection, an echo even, of my relationship with the Divine discovered through my relationships with and through others, through community, through silence and stillness, through God and creation. However, you may imagine or understand God, the Divine Mystery, at work in your own life. I grew up a Christian. I am still a Christian, an Episcopalian (*Worldwide Anglican Communion*), so I tend to visualize these relationships (*this Gestalt*) through the Trinity, or Trinitarian symbols.

I have also studied Buddhism and have many Buddhist friends; in this sense I am a “double-belonger,” a term coined by Prof. Paul F. Knitter at Union Theological Seminary. In my case, I’m practicing or following the Christian faith and Buddhist philosophy. So, there are also Buddhist elements and language at play within many of the poems, like the Mahayana concepts of Samsara – Nirvana – Sunyata - Emptiness, and the related concept of dependent origination or arising.

Poetry to me is a symbolic language, a language of images, of myth and metaphor, where myth (*the function of myth – pointing us towards truth & transformation*) points us towards the ultimate truth of all creation. The Divine Mystery, God, the Trinity if one wishes to place it into a Christian context. Before any poem is ever written, before it takes form, it is formless, empty of words, but always full of the infinite potential and nature of all creation that is changeless and ever changing.

Think of the first few verses from Genesis: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was **without form, and void**; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.” (KJV Genesis 1:1-3)

Our words about God are symbolic; language itself is symbolic, composed of symbols. Whatever symbols we may use to describe God as Divine Ultimate Mystery, such symbols are always fingers pointing at the moon.<sup>1</sup> Creation is happening now, ever evolving, ever present, and ever at work. God as love, through interacting and interconnecting, as a verb, through all our relationships, is actively at work within creation, sustaining creation through love; creation is an act of love.

2. The "*A Mockingbird's Song*" and "*Mockingbird Morning*" are two of my favorite ones among many in this amazing work. The senses truly come alive when you read them. Were you writing these poems as you were experiencing the song? It seemed that way while reading it.

These are two of my favorite poems as well, and they were both written very much within the moment. Writing them each was a singular and holistic experience; in some ways the poems wrote themselves. In the case of "*A Mockingbird's Song*" I got up very early one morning to write, to be intentional about writing. And there really was this one Mockingbird singing in the tree, just outside our window at home. I started listening and then typing, trying my best to be in that moment, and the words came pouring forth. I tried to get them down as quickly they came; afraid at some level that they might disappear or dissolve from my mind.

Writing "*Mockingbird Morning*" was a similar experience, except that I was standing in our front yard with a cup of coffee in hand, early in the morning, still dark outside. I did hear two Mockingbirds singing together as a duet, the moon was out; I was standing under a Pecan Tree. And I did yearn or long to simply sit there all morning listening. I still go back to that moment at times, to rest there, it too was a singular moment, a moment of openness.

I love it when this happens in writing, when the words seem to flow out of you like nectar. It's always a moment and an experience of grace, a gift of grace. I would encourage people to read the poems, experience the song, they'll feel it too I hope.

3. Silence and stillness are two beautiful concepts that are captured throughout your work. Explain how these two processes punctuate your world daily. Do you agree that silence and stillness are where the gods reside?

I do believe that we can come to know the mystery of God in stillness, in silence, in sacrament, in meditation, beyond all words and thoughts and images, to quote the Old Testament Psalms; "*Be still and know that I am God.*"

4. Do you meditate every day? If so, what type of meditation do you practice?

I do try my best to practice prayer and meditation in some form every day, in some instances that practice may come in the form of writing poetry or prose. At other times it is a very intentional practice based upon Christian or Buddhist meditations I've been taught. You might say I like to mix my metaphors, or at least my practice (praxis).

I may start with a Buddhist technique and end with a Christian one, or the other way around. Ultimately, I'm getting to a point of stillness and silence within, where I'm letting go of all thoughts, all words, all images, and simply resting in the Presence of God, in that openness, while everything else around me dissolves away. We might think of these words from T.S. Eliot in his beautiful poem *Burnt Norton*, it's like this I think, if we can put such an experience into words. It is a dance, we dance.

*At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;*

*Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,  
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,  
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,  
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,  
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.*

5. You wrote a beautiful poem dedicated to the poet Rumi. How did his work influence your own writings?

Rumi's poetry has lived with and within me for a long time, most of my adult life. I was first introduced to his poetry through my personal study of Sufism, twenty years ago or longer. Books on Sufism are certainly part of our home library. Sufi Literature is rich in diversity and wisdom, for instance, I love the parables and humor of Nasrudin (*Nasreddin*). Then there is Coleman Barks, whose free verse work with Rumi's poetry is a work of pure genius, brilliant in its simplicity and presentation. I love this translation by Barks.

*Dissolver of sugar, dissolve me,  
if this is the time.  
Do it gently with a touch of a hand, or a look.  
Every morning I wait at dawn. That's when  
it has happened before. Or do it suddenly  
like an execution. How else  
can I get ready for death?  
  
You breathe without a body, like a spark.  
You grieve, and I begin to feel lighter.  
You keep me away with your arm,  
but the keeping away is pulling me in.*

I believe that Rumi would like the poem I wrote because he was a universalist of his time, looking upon Islam, Judaism, Christianity, or any of the great faiths, with an open heart and a good eye, as a path towards the Divine. The voice and work of Rumi inspired (*breathed into me*) and helped me to discover my own poetic voice, to trust that voice, to take heart, to have courage, to write, to be unafraid in writing, to be, to take flight.

6. Thich Nhat Hahn wrote a book titled, "Living Buddha, Living Christ." You too note the similarities in their teachings. Why and what do you think that these two god like beings had so much in common?

In Christian theology, we speak of Christ as both fully human and fully divine. This is a great mystery in the Christian tradition. Still, if at some level we are created in the image of God, then God's Spirit dwells within us all, it does. Life gives us each a chance to understand that mystery and our fullest human potential, to grow spiritually. Both the Buddha and Christ were men of compassion, men who understood the potential of wisdom, compassion, love, and forgiveness to transform the world and our own lives. I believe that they were both inspired by this love, and they certainly lived lives of great compassion. Ultimately, beyond all religious dogma and doctrine, this is what they shared in common.

One of my favorite scriptures in the New Testament comes from 1 John 4:16; – *"So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."* This says it all for me, if we abide in love, then we abide in God, we abide in the Divine Mystery. Christ and the Buddha both abide in love, in compassion, in the openness of love and its transforming power to heal our lives.

7. You write in the poem titled "Eternal Life" what it means if you really believed in it. As the poem unfolds you tell us your thoughts of what you "think it would mean." Do you believe in eternal life and reincarnation?

What an intriguing question. Yes, I do believe; "I believe Lord, help my unbelief." I believe that we can experience eternal life now, in the eternal now. What may come later, and in what form, is still a mystery to me. I do trust that there is something more, beyond this life, a greater reality. But, I also think that it is something we can come to know and be known by in this life too. All the great mystical traditions and faiths of humankind point us towards this mystery. It's important I think to live in that mystery, to let it be what it is for now, not to worry. To live in the moment, and that's what this poem tries to capture and express, as do many of the other poems.

8. In the midst of this stirring spiritual exploration, how do you see the two poems "Which and That" and "Poets Without Punctuation" fitting in with the rest of the work?

Ah, these are poems that I hope will open up a bit of humor and humility (*as in the word - humus, grounded, of the earth, soil, and ground*) in the reader, certainly for the poet who wrote them. We tend to take ourselves far too seriously at times. And these two poems cut through some of that, they help us to see ourselves in the midst of both life and mystery. Writing is hard, and following all the rules of formal writing even harder, it's all hard work. These poems are also a reminder, not to take myself too seriously in my own spiritual life.

9. In these times of strife, conflict and so many personal challenges, you weave lyrical threads of hope, compassion, and faith into your poems. Is that what you are attempting to convey - that all is not lost and if you do feel a sense of aimlessness you can find your way back through love and faith?

Most certainly, life is what we make it, and the richness of life is discovered in and through our relationships with one another and within creation. We forget this far too often. We forget that the Divine Mystery, God, is in front of us all the time. We are not only human beings, but spiritual beings, we live in the midst of God, and God lives in our midst. This is what Jesus tells us in many of his parables and teachings. All the core faiths of humankind point this out. God as the Divine Mystery is here with us, amongst us; a simple thought, a single breath, or a poem away. I hope that these poems point people back towards the Divine Mystery, and to an understanding that they can find this mystery dwelling within.

10. What's next? Do you have another book in the works?

I am working on a new collection of poetry, a book; one that I hope will be published within the next twelve months. The title will probably be, ***When Angels Are Born***.

The poems are diverse and varied, relational, contemplative, confessional; many touch on the divine mystery of nature and draw upon Buddhist and Christian images. Some are intentionally brief, like a snap-shot. While other poems are narrative and focus on my relationship with people; my paternal grandfather, my two best friends of forty years, a favorite aunt and uncle, childhood memories.

One of my hopes in this work is to align the Christian concepts of *Kenosis*, Greek for emptiness, and *Creatio Ex Nihilio*, creation out of nothingness, and the Buddhist concept *Śūnyatā* or *Emptiness* and *Dependent Arising*, to bring them together.

## Biography

Ron Starbuck is the author of *Wheels Turning Inward*, a rich collection of over fifty poems, following a poet's mythic and spiritual journey that crosses easily onto the paths of many contemplative traditions. He has been deeply engaged in an Interfaith-Buddhist-Christian dialogue for many years. Ron holds a lifelong interest in Christian mysticism, comparative religion, theology, and various forms of contemplative practice. He is a former Vice President with JP Morgan Chase, now serving in the public sector on an information technology executive management team. He is also forming a new nonprofit company, **Saint Julian Press, Inc.**, to work with emerging and established writers and poets, and offer their work to the world in the context of a cultural, interfaith, and literary dialogue. He writes occasionally for Parabola Magazine and also author's three blogs, two poetry and one prose.

To learn more about Saint Julian Press, go to this web site.

<http://www.saintjulianpress.com/>

1. God As A Verb – Parabola Magazine Tangent: <http://www.parabola.org/book-review/god-as-a-verb>