ast January I received a request from Karen Launchbaugh to write a verse to be used as an invocation at the banquet of the Society for Range Management. Poetry is a very special and powerful form of communication. Some people are inspired by it, others are put off by it, and some just plain don't get it. It comes in many styles. Because my poetry is different from some poetry written and enjoyed by many SRM members, I hesitated. My poems are mostly talking to myself. But I find it hard to reject a request from Karen. I decided, with some trepidation, to write something Octavio Paz might call “a ramble through the night.”

**BREAKING BREAD ON THE PALOUSE**

**AN INVOCATION**

Let us celebrate our oneness with the land we serve

*each bite of lamb ties us to mountain meadows*

*and sagebrush hills*

*each potato brings raindrops falling from the skies*

*soaking through soil*

*bubbling down streams*

*wetting prairies where pronghorn and buffalo roamed*

The land was different when the first human arrived

*walked across the Palouse eating what he could find*

*multiplying his kind,*

*changing the land with spears and sticks*

*killing mice and mammoths*

*digging tubers from the soil*

*diverting streams, re-engineering the land without a plan*

Then ships of mighty nations reunited continents

*where all living things had evolved in isolation*

*new diseases, plants and animals*

*raced ahead of conquering armies*

*changed the land*

*formed new connections*

*Cayuse horses became royal symbols in the Northwest*

*More humans came, bringing guns and wagons*

*and plows and trains and computers and smartphones.*

*as we applied each new technology*

*we distanced ourselves*

*from oneness with the land*

*dominating but realizing*

*we are stewards of a scarred system that must sustain us*
Some of us are as crisp as fresh picked greens
some bleed like a rare sirloin on a charcoal grill
others are like lentils, supplying protein without blood
together we bring
  sweetness of an apple cobbler
  wisdom of an aged cheddar
  boldness of a Columbia Valley cabernet sauvignon

But land does not belong to us, we are part of the land
our role is like a brain, thinking, planning, controlling
we are responsible for health and well being
of our system
  but the brain is not property of the heart.
  and the heart is not owned by the toes.

let us celebrate the bounty of our earth, let us be one with the land

Octavio Paz (1914–1998) experimented with poetry,
trying to get his readers to think—to write their own poem
as they read his. Paz was a Mexican poet, writer, and diplo-
mat, who received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1990.
He said he wrote “little phrases” to allow other people to
make their own poems in their heads. Some of Paz’s poems
are developed with the discipline of regular meter and rhyme
most people expect. But in some of his most acclaimed verse
he used other forms, especially when his message was to
teach, to change behavior.

Paz’s death in April 1998 caused me to rethink my own
writing. I had almost given up writing poems after partici-
pating in a poetry reading at a long-past SRM meeting. As
each poem was read, I felt more and more out of place. I
criticize not the other writers. Their poems were good.
Those assembled were far better poets than I. Their words,
rhyme, and meter brought laughter to the bar. Performance
appeared as important as the content.

My problem was not with the other poets or their style
of writing. It was with me. Most cowboy poems are aimed
at a specific audience. Some are oral history of the people
who tamed the west. They are designed to make people
laugh and appreciate the cowboy culture. That is a good
thing. But it is not my thing.

The poets I most admire write, in May Swenson’s words,
standing on the end of the diving board, alone, naked, not
thinking of the “how” or “why” or the best technique, but just
the sensation ... not caring whether anyone watches or not.

Paz’s death reminded me I wrote not to entertain, but to
record a feeling, an emotion. The poetry book that most
influenced my life is Dag Hammarskjöld’s Markings. He,
Pablo Neruda, and Paz wrote to change things. Paz said
writers of his century are oppressed to be concerned with
politics in the same way intellectuals of another century
were oppressed by the church. He claimed he was just a
translator with his poems.

Poets I admire write from the gut as well as from the
heart. Like Swenson, they are not afraid to stand naked and
alone. Like Paz, they are oppressed by a cause. I favor poetry
taken to the people—in hospitals and bars, tire stores and
city hall, in churches and SRM meetings. Poets I admire
publish pamphlets and hand them out on street corners.

We land care professionals are oppressed to speak for the
land. Poems—all kinds of poems—should be read at SRM
meetings. They should be published in our journals. Whether
cowboy poems, or rap songs, or sonnets or another form,
they should be written in each person’s most effective form.
We should encourage our colleagues to write about the land
and its people. If prose comes easier, write it. We use our
writing, regardless of style, to teach about land and people.
Whatever we read or publish, it should make people think,
write, and act to make the world better.

Paz breathes no more, but his poems are with us. Few
can be a Paz. I do not claim to be a poet, or a good writer.
But I would like for my actions and my thoughts, like Paz’s,
to challenge readers to write poems in their hearts and
become oppressed against the indignities that afflict the land
we serve. And I would be pleased if I move readers to write
rebuttals or agreement.

Little phrases are powerful tools, whether in prose or
poetry or carved in granite. Whatever words we chisel in
stone, scribble in greeting cards, publish in pamphlets, read
in bars, or write in peer-reviewed journals, should make
readers think—and then act. We are the voice of the land.

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