

WHAT POWERS YET REMAIN

A sermon by Galen Guengerich
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Reading:

“Counting, This New Year’s Morning, What Powers Yet Remain To Me”
Jane Hirshfield

The world asks, as it asks daily:
And what can you make, can you do, to change my deep-broken, fractured?

I count, this first day of another year, what remains.
I have a mountain, a kitchen, two hands.

Can admire with two eyes the mountain,
actual, recalcitrant, shuffling its pebbles, sheltering foxes and beetles.

Can make black-eyed peas and collards.
Can make, from last year’s late-ripening persimmons, a pudding.

Can climb a stepladder, change the bulb in a track light.

For four years, I woke each day first to the mountain,
then to the question.

The feet of the new sufferings followed the feet of the old,
and still they surprised.

I brought salt, brought oil, to the question. Brought sweet tea,
brought postcards and stamps. For four years, each day, something.

Stone did not become apple. War did not become peace.
Yet joy still stays joy. Sequins stay sequins. Words still bespangle, bewilder.

Today, I woke without answer.

The day answers, unpockets a thought from a friend

don't despair of this falling world, not yet

didn't it give you the asking

Sermon:

The contemporary American poet Jane Hirshfield's first published poem appeared shortly after she graduated from Princeton in 1973. She was a member of the university's first graduating class to include women. Although the poem won her an award as a promising young poet, she put aside her writing to study at the San Francisco Zen Center for the better part of the next decade.

She said, "I felt that I'd never make much of a poet if I didn't know more than I knew at that time about what it means to be a human being." She added, "I don't think poetry is based just on poetry; it is based on a thoroughly lived life."

In recent years, Hirshfield's poetry has increasingly focused on the sciences and especially the climate crisis. She has been poet in residence at a neuroscience research program in California and at an experimental forest in Oregon. In 2017, she founded *Poets for Science*, an interactive exhibit of science poems that has traveled to venues across the country.

Perhaps not surprisingly, many of Hirshfield's poems hinge on a moment of insight involving the natural world. Her poem titled "Counting, This New Year's Morning, What Powers Yet Remain To Me" served as our reading for the morning. It begins:

The world asks, as it asks daily:

And what can you make, can you do, to change my deep-broken, fractured?

I count, this first day of another year, what remains.

I have a mountain, a kitchen, two hands.

Can admire with two eyes the mountain,
actual, recalcitrant, shuffling its pebbles, sheltering foxes and beetles.

Can make black-eyed peas and collards.

Can make, from last year's late-ripening persimmons, a pudding.

Can climb a stepladder, change the bulb in a track light.

For four years, I woke each day first to the mountain,
then to the question.

The poem opens at dawn on New Year's Day. According to the title, the task of this particular day is to count what powers remain in the face of what has been deep-broken and fractured. The poem doesn't say what's been broken and fractured. But whatever it is, it's mountainous — a looming presence the poem describes as having a recalcitrant actuality. In other words, whatever has been broken and fractured is truly

broken and fractured, and it's going to be hard to change it for the better. It's a mountain of a problem.

Especially on the first day of the new year, the poem suggests, the presence of this mountainous problem poses a question. Truth be told, it's a question that gets posed each morning of life, but today it appears with renewed urgency. What powers remain to us? What can we do to change what needs changing? In the face of a mountainous problem, it's a mountainous question.

For my part, I've always been attracted to mountains – even though I was born in the flat and fertile farmlands of central Delaware and spent most of my teens in the flat pinelands of South Arkansas. In symbolic terms, mountains represent a daunting reality – a force of nature that looms over us, poses a challenge to us, and perhaps ultimately needs to be climbed by us. Of course, some people think literal mountains need literally to be climbed. In some ways, I am one of those people.

I've always been fascinated by the quest to climb Mount Everest and other pinnacles of the natural world. I've read many of the books that have been written on the topic and have seen many of the movies – both the triumphant tales and also the tragic ones. When I was much younger, I harbored a secret hope that maybe one day I would climb Mount Everest, though my only achievement in the climbing arena has been to climb Mount Washington in New Hampshire a couple of times.

When it became clear to me that my life was no longer mine alone – I had made both personal and professional commitments that I needed to take seriously, which meant not ending up needlessly dead – I downgraded my aspirations to Mount Kilimanjaro. After having spent a couple of days at 12,000 feet of altitude several years ago, I downgraded my altitude aspirations even further. Besides, I have discovered a different way I could climb the equivalent of Mount Everest.

It's called Everesting, and it's put on by an organization known as the 29029 Challenge. Everesting takes place at ski slopes in the US, not in the Himalayas in Nepal. Instead of skiing down the mountain and riding the gondola back up, you climb up the mountain and ride the gondola back down. This pattern continually repeats itself for 36 hours, typically without stopping for any significant period of time, until you have reached the cumulative equivalent of 29,029 feet of altitude, if indeed you do – the height of Mount Everest.

Everesting isn't a race, the organizers explain, and there are no winners. There are no podiums, no age or gender groups, or race categories. Your only goal is to ascend the mountain more times than you thought possible. The organizers recognize that hiking up the same mountain repeatedly is not easy. But, they say, anything worth achieving rarely is. You don't have to be a marathoner or Ironman to finish the 29029 Challenge. Rather, they say, it's an event for those who want to truly live.

I wake each day first to the mountain, the poet says, then to the question: what can I do with the powers that remain to me? The answer is to get climbing.

One of the best-known allegories of life as a climbing of the mountain appears in John Bunyan's allegory *Pilgrim's Progress*, which he penned more than three centuries ago. Besides the Bible, *Pilgrim's Progress* is the best-selling book in English of all time.

Bunyan describes a man named Christian, who undertakes a long and often tortuous journey from what Bunyan calls the wilderness of this world to the Celestial City. Christian begins his journey over the objections of his family, as well as his neighbors on either side, who go by the names Pliable and Obstinate. Christian's mettle is further tested in encounters with people like Mr. Worldly Wiseman, who lives in a town called Carnal Policy. Mr. Money-love and Mr. Hold-the-World tempt him in a different way, as do three hapless fellows named Simple, Sloth, and Presumption.

Christian passes through places like the Valley of Humiliation, the Slough of Despond, and, of course, the Valley of the Shadow of Death. He survives Doubting Castle, which is home to a giant named Despair, and he resists the allure of a town called Vanity Fair, a spectacle of ostentation and frivolity that had not yet been turned into a magazine. Occasionally along the way, Christian finds solace and rest, like the night he spends in Palace Beautiful, where a woman named Discretion lives with her daughters: Prudence, Piety, and Charity.

Early in the story, we discover the secret of Christian's eventual success. While traveling in the company of two men named Formalist and Hypocrisy, Christian comes to the foot of a hill called Difficulty, at the bottom of which he finds a spring. When Formalist and Hypocrisy see that the hill ahead is steep and high, they resolve to find an easier path to follow. One turns into a great wood; unbeknownst to Formalist and Hypocrisy, the name of that path is Danger. The other path leads into a great wide field; this path is called Destruction.

Christian, however, resolves to follow a narrow path that goes straight up the hill. After refreshing himself at the spring, he begins the trek, saying to himself along the way:

The hill, though high, I covet to ascend;
The difficulty will not me offend;
For I perceive the way to life lies here:
Come, pluck up, heart, let's neither faint nor fear.
Better, though *difficult*, the right way to go,
Than wrong, though *easy*, where the end is woe.

To climb whatever mountains life puts before us takes commitment — and the persistence to keep going, no matter what. “Come, pluck up, heart, let's neither faint nor fear. For I perceive the way to life lies here.”

The Everesting organizers may overstate the achievement of those who conquer the 29029 Challenge. Not everyone considers climbing a vertical distance of six miles in 36 hours truly living. But the cyclical nature of the 29029 climb gets the symbolic

challenge of climbing the mountains in our lives exactly right. The question gets posed not once, but repeatedly — not just on New Year’s Day, but every day. Are we going to take the next step with what powers remain to us? In symbolic terms at least, as Bunyan insists, our willingness to climb whatever mountains we need to climb is indeed “the way to life.”

In the face of whatever mountainous task looms before us, whether personal or political, whether professional or environmental, whether emotional or spiritual, we ask ourselves what powers remain to us — no matter what age we are or what shape we find ourselves in. What can we do today with the powers that remain to us?

I have awoken hungry, the poet says, and I can make black-eyed peas and collards, a pudding from persimmons. I can climb a step ladder and change a burned-out light bulb. I have salt and oil to use and sweet tea to drink. I have postcards and stamps to convey my hopes and wishes to others.

Make no mistake, the poet says, my powers are not fully equal to the needs of a broken and fractured world. Stones will not turn into apples because of my actions, nor will war magically become peace. Even so, the experience of joy remains joyful, and what’s dazzling and wonderful about the world remains dazzling and wonderful.

The beauty of the world and the joy that remains motivate us to continue the climb. Each day we awaken first to the mountain, then to the question. The poem concludes with the admonition that we should not despair of this falling world, not yet. It gave us what it had to give — the mountain and the asking.

Each day, life invites us to renew our purpose and embody our commitment. The climb is long and often hard. The willingness to continue keeps us moving toward our goal. The key is persistence: never give up.

Also, don’t allow yourself to ask whether you’re going to keep climbing. Christian didn’t pause each morning to see if there was another destination that looked more appealing or less strenuous. He just kept going. If we ask ourselves each day whether we want to do something that takes a lot of effort, the answer will sometimes — and maybe often — be no. So don’t ask the question. Don’t decide. Just do what needs to be done.

Spend time each day in meditation and reflection. Make a list of your friends and call one each day. Make a start on the necessary thing you’ve been avoiding. Whatever the journey, it begins with a goal, and it proceeds each day with the commitment to keep climbing, come what may.

In Bunyan’s tale, Christian eventually made it to the top of the mountain. Time will tell whether I eventually make a climb of 29,029 feet. But by taking another step upward each day, and then another, and then another, we give ourselves a chance of reaching the top. On this New Year’s Day, my prayer for all of us is that we will keep climbing.