

PASSION CREATIVITY INSPIRATION

# SENSES



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ROY JOHNSTON'S  
ECLECTIC ROAD  
TO UNIVERSAL  
UNDERSTANDING

# CULTURAL INTEGRATION THROUGH POETRY

Poetry: Roy Johnston  
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## ONCE AGAIN

the damage is done.  
See where our systems are broken  
in this country and no repair in sight.

Demosthenes is shamed  
by war and how we got there  
freedoms and their guarantors  
diminished by greedy motives.

Tossed in an ill wind  
by Jeffersonian masked tyrants,  
citizens are confused by preempted acts  
reaching for the New Order,  
moistened by the blood of non-represented children.

The howl of Ginsberg is required now  
to help trample the brown lashers  
and sagebrush rebels,  
and the WTO's fraudulent legends  
of immoral ethics and closed circuit TVs.

Move now – out of an Empire  
disgraced by our  
fallen false leader.

Return toward a common ground-  
of sustaining economics and conservation.  
Partisan victories, be trashed.

Come, new-brushed wind,  
winding down our valley,  
toss grace with gentle rain  
to seed a new Republic.

# Poetry sings the value of culture

Poetry sings the value of culture  
Culture determines the success of a community  
Man requires the discipline  
of an ordered existence to survive.

from "Bends of Poetry"

**T**hese lines by Roy K Johnston in his new book, *Seeds of Tolerance*, sum up the many parts of this modern poet-philosopher.

"Culture" and "Community" are key to understanding Johnston's written and spoken works. His passion is "cultural integration," as he calls it—not to be confused with racial integration. "Cultural integration" is Johnston's unique idea that everything in arts and culture are interconnected and related, and should be brought together. He first realized his calling to this subject when he was Associate Dean of Fine Arts in Hattiesburg, MS. "At the time I really had a feeling that everything in learning, in intellectual pursuits, were what the academy's mission was, and that everything in the arts was really connected."

As obvious as this may seem, Johnston has found that this premise is not fully understood; he has made it his mission to bring the idea of cultural integration to public attention. He certainly has the background, education and life experience to do so.

Why does everything  
have to sing to me,  
it really doesn't  
or does it?

from "Why"

Johnston's artistic life began young, though neither of his parents was particularly so inclined. His father was a naval architect in charge of shipyard repair and design; his mother was a homemaker. Roy, however, knew early on what direction he wanted to take. "I always knew I would be a musician," he told me. "My dad was trying to encourage me to be a lawyer, so he steered me very strongly towards academics. But when I was about six, I started playing piano, then switched to clarinet because I loved the sound of that instrument so much."

Growing up in southern California he discovered that the Torrance school system offered an environment for the arts, and he was able to strive, as he puts it, to become "the best of the best."

After high school, Johnston bowed to his father's wishes and attended UCLA to study law—but soon dropped out. "I was already playing music professionally by then," he recalls, "and a lot of us musicians were into both classical and jazz. Basically, though, my track was principle clarinetist, but I became so interested in the constructional and compositional aspect of music that I started sitting in at such well-known jazz clubs as The Lighthouse in Hermosa Beach."

During this period, in the 1950s, Roy had his own little jazz combo and was asked sometimes to provide music for the parties of movie stars, even some big names at the time, such as Charles Laughton and Elsa Lanchester. For a while, Roy even occupied the clarinet chair in the 20th Century Fox studio orchestra.

Towards the end of the 50s, Roy was invited to play with Woody Herman's big band. Becoming exposed to more jazz was an important stage in Roy's development; much of what he has accomplished since has evolved from that. Yet, before he could get where he is today, Roy decided once again to honor his father's wishes to become a lawyer, and he returned to New York. "But it didn't do it for me," he says, laughing heartily, "so, I joined the Air Force! And why? Because it provided me with a certain amount of discipline that I didn't have then; and room and board—and time to practice."

So this man who wanted to be a musician ended up completing his studies in the Air Force, at Germany's Weisbaden Conservatory. In the Air Force, Roy was assigned to Intelligence, where he reported directly to General Curtis LeMay, the head of Strategic Air Command. It was from General LeMay that Roy got many of his own ideas about leadership. Despite the diverse path that led him there, eventually Roy went on to the prestigious Julliard School of Music.

Passion is not just an indulgence.  
It leads to the greatest creativity,  
the deepest grasp of others,  
the most vivid self renewal.

from "Ruminations About Love"

Along his life path, this multi-faceted man has acquired broad experience in higher education, the many forms of the arts, business development, strategic planning, community and institutional relations, and fund-raising. His contacts within politics, as well as cultural affairs, have led him to work with diverse groups both nationally and internationally.

From his first teaching job at the School of Fine Arts University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg, where he showed an aptitude for public relations, to a position at the Boston Conservatory, which the former dean of USC (a colleague in the International Council of Fine Arts Deans) recommended him for, Johnston has developed a wealth of experiences.

After a stint as Executive Director of the Ashtabula Arts Center in Ohio, Johnston was ready to move into headier provinces. Returning to Los Angeles in the late 80s, he set up his own business, Creative Development Associates, and was hired by a number of non-profit organizations. At that time, he was fascinated by the writings of "the ant man", Edward O. Wilson, and was inspired to renew his work on cultural integration. "He [Wilson] was the one who told

me to keep fighting for and continuing my research into the culture that comes out of successful communities." This conversation gave birth to the group, Salon Mt. Washington. "I began to see what we could do with the interrelationships between the various arts."

At the Salon, Johnston brought together creative people: painters, musicians, writers, sculptors, architects. These different artists were able to learn from and help each other. The Salon also hosted many different guest speakers, from Jorge Pardo, an artist in the area of design at the Museum of Contemporary Art in LA, to Yael Pardess, the Senior Visual Director of World Disney Parks. By bringing together such varied forms of art and sections of society that would not otherwise have the opportunity to come together, Johnston realized his dream of "cultural integration."

He was invited to speak on this topic in the People's Republic of China in 2006. Although warned not to mention politics, which proved difficult, he still enjoyed a successful reading of his poetry. This experience provided several poems in "Seeds of Tolerance" (see "River of Tolerance" and "The Great Wall").

In 2004, Johnston took a leap of faith and moved, with his wife, Pam, to the central coast of California. Through the association with Cal Poly University, where his wife works, as well as through the local arts community, Roy has established a cultural presence throughout the region.

**We stand behind the curtain of life  
when it wants to draw upon us  
the miracles that are the wonders of now.**

from "The Past"

Johnston continues to work to bring together different cultural branches. He regularly offers up his store of knowledge for the California Arts Council's projects. He reminded me, too, that he has been consulted by such bigwigs as John Sweeney, President of the AFL/CIO; Richard Riordan, former mayor of Los Angeles; and Gray Davis, former Governor of California.

Working with non-profit groups, who have to serve the common good, helps him recognize his own feelings about giving back. "This is something that my whole family has always been very adamant about," he explained. "My late uncle, Otto Kahn, was the leader of one of the largest investment firms in New York. After he moved to the U.S., one of his distinctions was saving the Metropolitan Opera house when it was financially threatened."

This is Johnston's whole idea of universal understanding and cultural integration. He has brought international recognition to the African-American Cultural Faire and Marketplace, along with Director James Burke. And his interest is not limited to the arts; he gives his time also to a subgroup of the Amateur Athletic Foundation, called Kids in Sports, which impacts over 10,000 kids in Southern California.

His presence in the arts scene in San Luis Obispo is ubiquitous. He can be seen at every poetry event in the county and shows up at weekly salons held by grande dame Linnaea Phillips, attended by artists, writers and architects. He always brings his quirky sense of the world as it is. While not a "flag-waver" type, he has intense views about where the U.S.—and the world—stands. In fact, he wrote extensively on this topic in his 2004 book of poems, "The System Is Broken." He was recognized by the City of Los Angeles for his 35 years of service as performer, professor, poet and pioneer in the field of cultural integration.

**Our public cries  
for no more failures.  
It's been a failing decade.  
Where are our solutions?**

from "Questions Make Solutions"

Johnston feels that "Seeds of Tolerance" is a message: we all need to give a little to make things work. "What I'm talking about," he explained "is the dialogue that goes on in all communities." Johnston, himself, gives in numerous ways. He's an ardent supporter of the arts right in his own community—several locally-rendered pieces hang among his vast collection of paintings in his canyon home.

Now focusing most of his energy on poetry, he finds time to travel in support of fellow artists. He attended the 18th Annual Writer's Workshop at the William Joyner Center for the Study of War and Social Consequences, was invited by Sarah Browning, the editor of Poets Against War, to be the featured reader at their event and participated in the locally-organized National Peace Day Celebration, among his numerous globally-oriented events.

**Peace requires the fulfilling balance  
to reach out to every creature.**

from "Plea for Peace"

Peace, tolerance and cultural integration are priorities in Roy Johnston's eclectic life. He wants to bring communities together artistically and culturally in order to foster understanding.

"I dream for the day that all the peoples will admire and take part in the value of cultural integration importantly based on the unity of knowledge." He is discouraged about the education system right now that doesn't teach kids enough analytical tools for them to fully connect all the disciplines. But his dreams are vibrant and numerous.

"One of my dreams is to have some acreage with enough space for about six to eight little dwellings, so that artists can finish whatever project they're working on."