

Luke Maguire Armstrong
A Life Gifted in Poetry

We found our friendship across canyons of unlikely time. He was 60 years my elder, a World War II veteran, an educator, a traveler, and a poet—the mutual thread that wove us. The day I met Herbert, he was 88 years old and looking to hire someone to edit his poetry then submit his work to publishers. “The poetry,” he said, “I owe it to the poetry to take a stab at getting it out into the world.”

At the time, I was living in New York facing familiar trouble amid endless fun. Life costs money and if you’re an artist following your dreams odds are you’ll have very little of it in the beginning. My weekly freelance hustle included scouring the Internet for writing opportunities. When I saw Herbert Engelhardt’s posting, it seemed of the scam variety. Getting paid to read and thoughtfully respond to poetry—had to be a scam.

I remember a college professor saying, “There’s no money in poetry. Even Frost had a day job. No one makes a living off of it.” I remember thinking at the time, what a horrible thing to say.

I submitted a cover letter detailing my credentials and heard nothing back and life went on. I continued to race through my artist’s dance in the big city. I tutored kids in the Bronx to pay my rent and completed odd writing jobs, producing pointless Internet content that served my artist’s dream of being a writer as much as a stuffed iguana makes a good best friend. In the spaces outside of the hustle, I lit candles and wrote poetry, and worked on a book in the small room of my own I rented on Brooklyn’s gentrifying frontier. I moved to Kenya and covered the 2013 election as a freelance journalist, which is the fancy way of saying I was getting into credit card debt. I moved back to New York and a friend offered me a week on a couch to figure out my life. I had \$50 in my pocket. I bought marijuana and wrote a song. I received an email from Herbert’s typist Maria—six months after I’d applied for the poetry job.

What I didn’t know then is that determination isn’t enough. But it’s necessary because it keeps you long enough on your heart’s path for teachers, guides, and saviors to appear along the way. Herbert would become all three for me.

The next day in Greenwich village, I knocked on the door that Herbert had lived his last fifty years behind.

“Come in, come in,” a raspy voice commanded. The heat was on despite it being a warm spring day. In the expansive living room, a massive self-portrait in an impressionist style Herbert’s daughter had painted faced a wall of books. An old man rose from a lounge chair and greeted me on unsteady, but determined legs. He motioned for me to sit next to him.

“Well, you must be who Maria talked to on the telephone?” He said in that coy New York accent that’s held an ironic smile.

“I don’t need a copyeditor,” Herbert said. “You won’t find any typos in here.” He smacked a stack of pages. This was his poetry. On the top left corner of each poem, the draft number was meticulously recorded. On

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average each draft had gone through more than fifty redrafts, some over a hundred revisions of their poetic vision.

“How much do you want to get paid?” Herbert asked a question I’d never heard from an employer. I walked out of his apartment that day with \$300 cash in my pocket for 10 hours of editing work—good money for a guy with 3 days left on a couch.

And thus at a critical juncture of my artistic life, I learned that when my college professor said “there’s no money in poetry,” what she really was saying was that she’d kept her view of possibilities so narrow as not to see into the sea of potentialities waiting for those brave enough to stick it out until a favorable one opens its wings and invites you to take flight.

A Call to Put his Lived Life in Poetry

Herbert didn’t receive his call to write poetry until his 70s when a brush with death led him to turn a reflective eye towards his life. During his 70s and 80s, he crafted some 2,200 poems. Within these are his reflections on life as a soldier in World War II, keen observations of the ever-changing life in New York City, portraits of the personalities he had come to know, art history rants, meditations on love and sex, and where the two intersect. Herbert had a watchful eye that saw people with a romantic heart capable of conveying their essence into a cohesive body of work that was unique, insightful, and sparkling with life.

When I dove into his verses I found myself led through a poetic inquiry into the questions of life as played out within the reality of someone who had lived and loved it as fully as the rules allow. He saw people like a poet does, deeper than they often saw themselves. Each poem was hewn from that unrelenting necessity only artists comprehend.

With some poems, I had nothing to say, others only minor suggestions. On most, I simply wrote an account of the feelings and reactions his verses stirred in me. When Herbert received my first edits, he called me, “Here’s something I can use,” he said, “I don’t take half your suggestions, but they help me see my poems in new ways. When can you come over again?”

From Client to Poetic Mentor

We began to meet after every block of edits I turned in. I was living this wistful man’s life through his poetry and he was reliving his own life through my eyes. We’d go for lunch and coffee. He’d read me his favorite T. S. Eliot poems and I would read him his poems so he could experience the magic of hearing his poetry through another’s voice.

“All poets are up against the same problem,” he told me, “The problem is everyone is chasing something that most people never find.”

Sometimes I read him my poems. “That’s nice, but how much can you cut without losing the pulse of what you want to say?”

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Herbert became one of those rare friends young artists are redeemed to have. He was seasoned in the ways I was raw and he was willing to share his view of the world with me.

A Beacon in the City

When the squeeze of New York living became too much, my wanderlust took my life back on the road. I took Herbert's yet unedited poems with me and we corresponded through the phone and mail.

When two years after our first meeting I'd read and commented upon the last of his 2,200 poems, my next job was to submit a selection of his work for publication—a task many a poet knows is laden with rejections and non-responses.

Herbert's poetry was simple and succinct, bold and well-crafted. A thorough vision of his brilliance emerged in the course of reading dozens of his poems. Here was the last living World War II poet and it was literally my job to open the closed doors of the poetry publishing world to him. But I was not what you call connected to the right people.

My efforts did yield a few of his poems in some small journals print and online. Did the readerships know the man they held in their hands? I took Herbert's rejections worse than my own. I wanted the world to know him as I had—a grandfather, a guru, a romantic, a sage—an enduring poet with a uniquely beautiful voice and important things to relate.

But Herbert was happy a few places had published his work. In truth, Herbert seemed to have learned to give himself to the doing and didn't seem moved by the details of the outcome. When the work ended, we still meet whenever I pass through New York, I go to see Herbert. I exhale relief every time he picks up the phone. A man in his mid-90s now, I know one day I will call and he will not answer. As he puts it,

"If I died in 20 minutes, no one would say 'oh he was so young. They'd say it was time.'"

On my most recent visit with Herbert, I asked for permission to write about him and publish the piece along with a few favorite poems. "I really don't think I'm a very good subject matter," he said, "But I don't have any formal objections to it."

So once upon a time, when I was chasing poetic dreams in New York, a man gave me his entire life in poetry. He did it because he felt a duty to the poems whose crafting had absorbed the last decade of what turned out to be his long life.

Herbert explains himself by relating the tale of a bygone trip he took to the beach with a friend. His friend upon seeing the ocean exclaimed, "Wow," and dropped his bag, kicked off his shoes, and lost himself running towards the surf.

"I had noticed that the beach was beautiful," says Herbert, "but it never occurred to me to scream wow and run into it. That person was a

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participant, and I was a viewer, an onlooker. I wished sometimes that I would scream wow and run to the ocean, but that's just not my style."

Herbert not only saw the ocean that day, he saw his friend more deeply than he knew himself. That's what made Herbert a poet. He didn't try to be one. He was a poet by necessity. He let seven decades of his life go by as a soldier, a student, a worker, a husband, a father, a businessman, an avid learner of history, a traveler, a teacher, and one day after a brush with death, in his 70s, he became a poet. Something stirred in him and he spent his eighth decade meticulously teasing a story of his life out from the deepest place within.

Herbert was a poet who without compromise turned his life over to poetry, allowing his muses to speak through him. Somehow in the course of that listening, I was led into his poetic world in a way that inspired and enabled my own life to advance further on the artist's path.

Postscript:

At the age of 96, Herbert passed from this world March, 2021. In one of my last mail correspondence to him, I sent him this essay. While he didn't live to see it published, he knew I wasn't one to give up on it until it was. Cheers Herbert.

In 2019 Herbert published a book of his war poetry, *World War II Poetry: Memories of an Ordinary Soldier*.