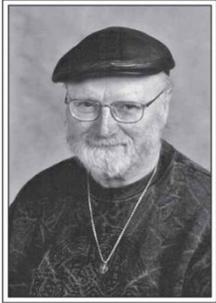


DREAMS IN THE NEWS

Russell Lockhart in Conversation with Kim Rosen



Four in the morning on the 5th day of the Third Isle of Wight Music Festival in 1970. Rioting, fires, cans and bottles thrown at the performers. In the midst of this chaos, Leonard Cohen took the stage. His poetry-in-song tamed the 600,000-strong beast, widely regarded as the moment when the “60s” came to an end and something different came into being. Bob Johnson said it was Leonard Cohen who brought poetry into music. Judy Collins pointed to the unavoidable crisis of the heart and mind in listening to his songs. Joan Baez touched on the crucial thing: words in song do not have to “make sense.” His words came from so deep inside him; they crossed subversively all borders and

*reached into the depths of everyone who heard. Art can do that. The sheer audacity of poetry unveils the hidden, gives it voice, and prompts its heart-piercing song. Can poetry save us? The most popular TV program in the Middle East is Million’s Poet, people reciting poetry! Can you imagine such a thing in the US? In Iraq, Freedom Space events are bringing Shiite and Sunni together to sing out songs and poems and these bitter enemies end up embracing. Can poetry save us? It always begins with one. The best example I know who has given voice to this idea is Kim Rosen, author of *Saved By A Poem*. It is a must-read book. But more important than reading it, is the doing of what she prescribes there as medicine for the tortured soul of our time: to become a disciple of a poem we love and to get it deep into our bones and then to tell it out loud to others, even strangers. Back in April, it was National Poetry Month. I spoke with Kim on the phone. Here are some bits and pieces from our conversation.*



RL: I’m brimming over with questions. Instead, I’ll give you a poem.

KR: Oh, I’d love that.

RL: This was my very first poem. It was collected for a book called something like *Childhood Poems and Other Odd Things*.

I once had a cow named Madie.
It looked like my old wife Sadie.
To give milk it wouldn’t;
I found out it couldn’t.
For Madie was not a lady.

KR: Oh! That’s hysterical!

RL: I know that you wrote poems when you were young. Do you remember any of your young poems?

KR: I have this book, velvet-covered, but *I* didn't get it until I was older. My first poem I wrote almost as soon as I could read and write. It was 1964. I was 8! It's called "Imagination."

Imagination can be lots of things
It can be a bell in your mind
That rings and rings
It can be flowers pink and blue
Someone's secret but you don't know who
It can be a parrot with a touch of turquoise on its head
Or your very own canopy bed
It can be a green and yellow telephone
Or a chocolate sundae ice cream cone
It can be an elephant's clean white tusk
Or the pink and blue at the edge of dusk

Now *that* was probably the last poem I ever wrote that wasn't "fraught."

RL: That phrase, "*at the edge of dusk*," strikes me as is an example of your capacity to "get through" the usual armor that protects people from poetry. This is a hallmark of your book *Saved By A Poem*, and is why I call it an *essential* book. Still, there may be some readers who don't know who Kim Rosen is or what she does. Who is Kim Rosen and what does she do?

KR: By taking poems to heart and speaking them out loud, I know less and less what the answer to that question is. Becoming intimate with a poem dissolves the boundaries around how one defines oneself. It's been liberating to discover that I'm not who I thought I was. It is not just poems that have taught me this. My inner work has led the way also. The poems become collaborative with other ways to question who I am psychologically, spiritually. I wrote a book, *Saved By A Poem: The Transformational Power of Words*. This book interwove three different paths in my personal and professional life. One path was self-inquiry: psychological and spiritual work that was verbal and non-verbal, conceptual and expressive.

The second thread was my love of the theater. I was never on stage after I was 9. At first that was not a choice. I would audition and up until 9, I would get the lead. Then, something happened and I did not get the lead and my little ego couldn't handle it. Whatever the reason, I went backstage. I became a director in the theater; my undergraduate degree was in theater and psychology. I was fascinated not with what it takes to act a character or direct a play, but what it takes to be transparent and authentic and real in the presence of other people. I started my theatre company when I was 19; everyone else was in their late 20s and 30s. My theatre company was very much focused on being authentic.

The third thread is poetry. I loved poetry until high school. In high school it became dry, analytic and war-based: *The Odyssey*, *The Iliad*. *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*—extraordinary works of art, but not what I was interested in as a teen. In the hands of my teachers, even Shakespeare became not Shakespeare but iambic pentameter. I turned away from reading poetry, but I still thought I was a poet. In my first class in freshman-year college I got slaughtered by the analytical approach of the teacher. That was the death of poetry for me.

Until 1994. I was in a very dark depression, probably the darkest place I have been in my life. Through a coincidence, I found a battered old cassette tape that had fallen out of the purse of one of my clients—I was a therapist and spiritual helper. I threw it in a tape deck. A man's voice was reciting poetry, his words booming through my house. It slayed me. I mean my defenses were slayed, the hard shell of depression broke open, and I was able to cry for the first time, the first step in freeing me from depression. The man was David Whyte. I began to read poems again and he pointed me to poems of the inner life, which I had not had any contact with before.

RL: In 1950, I was writing dark poems about the Korean War. The teacher was concerned about my mental health. She called in my parents and we marched to the principal's office and a conference about Russell's mental health. The principal, after hearing some of my poems said: "You are really a brown study!"

KR: A brown study?

RL: Yes, it's an old expression, used typically for poets and artists who are morbidly "lost in thought," becoming deep, dark and depressed. I knew what she was saying, so I countered with the snarliest 12-year-old voice I could muster, "I'm a black study!"

KR: We would have been friends! My 12-year old nephew in England is memorizing the poetry of Wilfred Owen in school. I'm not sure this would happen in this country, I'm almost sure that it wouldn't. It's extraordinary war poetry, amazing, dark and scary. I'm so thrilled that they are having kids learn this poetry by heart. So healing!

RL: With all our current wars subject to so much "unreality," Owen's poetry, particularly his "Dulce et Decorum Est," could bring much needed sobering. I encourage everyone to get this poem in their bones. I wish I had known it back in 1950. The second the thing you mentioned, the theater, is of interest to me because I have recently taken up reading Stanislavski's work. It was Lee Strasburg who developed what is now known as the "method acting" approach based on Stanislavski's work. Stanislavski rejected this American version of his method. The American version was that one needed to catch hold of an emotional experience from your own life and from that base one could act into the character in a real way. Stanislavski's method was not catching hold of something in your experience; you need to catch hold of where your *imagination* takes you when you read and play this character.

KR: I love that! I was never interested in the method approach when I was directing. What makes you turn to Stanislavski?

RL: A dream. A voice dream: “The answer is in Stanislavski.” That’s how I got into it. There are some remarkable things in his writing. I would not have gotten there otherwise. So this brings up the question: What role do dreams play in your work, in any way, in your poetry or in what you do, or how you live your life?

KR: When I was writing more poetry, a dream could always turn into a poem. As a writer of poetry, I found that what my dreams did, regardless of how I might work with them in terms of self-reflection, self-knowledge, or knowledge beyond self, the dreams unlatched the linearity of my mind, which I find is essential for good poetry whether you’re writing it or reading it. It’s what I hope to do now in my workshops with the immersive quality of poetry and music. It was Brother David Steindl-Rast who said, “If it’s not surprising, it is not a good poem.”

This is something I talk about in the chapter on the power of metaphor—the necessity of bringing two disparate elements together so surprising to the mind that it bursts open to another way of knowing rather than focusing only on the pragmatic approach.

My own dreams, when I was writing poetry (which I hope to do again), would give me a way to write without an allegiance to making sense. Robert Bly talks about this as “leaping poetry.” To me it’s a mystical practice, the leap. It’s in the leap where the mind opens and deeper wisdom comes through. In the line “when death comes like the hungry bear in autumn,” the leap is the *concept* of death paired with the visceral rawness of the hungry bear. The poem puts those two things together. Is that the leap? Or, is the leap from one’s stanza or one line to another? This often makes little sense to the cognitive mind. The form that Rumi wrote in was a series of couplets that don’t often have any connection with each other. Yet, the mind interacts with it in some way, and connections *happen*. I’m not sure it is the mind. It is a *presence* that interacts with the mind and becomes a participant in making these connections. What is so important to my work in workshops is that *the function of poetry is the same function as dreams*, which is bringing in the unexpected and meaningful. For me it has to be meaningful also. There are a lot of unexpected and clever poems out there that don’t actually speak to me. But these lines of Mary Oliver do: *My mother was the blue wisteria, my mother the mossy stream out behind the house, my mother alas, alas, did not always love her life, heavier than iron it was, she carried it in her arms from room to room, so unforgettable.* To go from mother, to wisteria, to the mossy stream . . . this has the power of dream to me. I do something in my workshops called the “poetry dive,” which is submersion for a good chunk of time with just music and spoken poetry. I use music to disengage the brain. Some people hate it because in this setting they can’t function in the usual linear way. The music is a lubricant and makes it slippery.

RL: Some years ago, I was with Robert Bly in a workshop and he was playing a dulcimer while he was reciting. I loved it. Then we went to lunch at a Chinese restaurant and he wanted to know my reaction to a particular poem he was working on, a poem about his father. He started reading it out, voicing it out loud. I was looking at the crowd and looking at the faces of the people as they were listening to this crazy person in the corner. Everyone had that look “who is this nut?” But then as Robert kept going, I could see the faces, I could see the faces change as they took in his words, as they listened. The whole place was entranced. Robert didn’t know what effect he was having. He was in the poem, in the voicing, in that deep way that he does. He was working on the poem, but the poem was working on the crowd. That was such a telling experience to me of what power a poem can have even in the most unexpected places. I think this is something to celebrate. So, how are you celebrating National Poetry Month?

KR: I’m working with these two ladies (Cathy DeForest and Nancy Bardos), who have created an organization called “Poets on The Loose.” They invited me to be the third creatrix in this organization. Poetsontheloose.com has all sorts of ways and suggestions about how to bring poetry to the streets. Basically, you get a bunch of poems you love, not long ones, and you go with a friend, or musician and you approach consenting strangers (a script on the website shows how one might approach strangers to find out if they are consenting), you read the poem and then you hand it to them. Nancy, in Port Orchard WA, has about 50 people out on the streets. Cathy, in Ashland OR, does the same thing. We are hoping to encourage people to take poetry to the streets everywhere.

RL: What a wonderful idea.

KR: We want to bring the power of poetry and how moving it can be to even a stranger on the street in the vibration of ordinary talk and life, to experience the rhythm, the sounds of breath when the poem is so deeply felt and voiced aloud. I’m also working with National Institute of Poetry Therapy and doing my own tele-seminars.

RL: Are you encouraged by the effect you’re having on the collective?

KR: It’s an idea whose time has come. Maybe that’s fantastic thinking, but I think not. I got an email from CC Carter the other day. She lives in such a different world. She was featured in Chapter 3, which tells the stories of people who have been saved by poetry. She is the woman who has the story of being a suicidal teenager and her grandmother gave her Maya Angelou and told her to recite “Phenomenal Woman” out loud, morning and evening. It saved her life. She became a spoken word artist and now runs spoken word events for battered and abused women in the Southside of Chicago. It’s a whole different style of poetry than I’m used to. Yet, she wrote a poem in honor of National Poetry Month in response to my book. It is so beautiful. I feel that what is coming through the African American community, hip-hop, rap, and spoken word community is converging with the Poetry Foundation initiative to bring poetry into the high schools. This is

unprecedented. It is converging as well with the collapse of the American economy and political system and the uselessness of continuing to acquire material outer things to fill our emptiness. I think all of these things are converging to bring poetry back to America.

RL: One of the things I've done over the years as I've traveled (which I don't do much anymore) would be to walk around the downtown streets encountering the street people. People beg for money. What I do is ask for dreams. They could have whatever change is in my pocket if they gave me a dream. Over the years I've collected these dreams from the streets. Some of these dreams are extraordinary. Sometimes, these experiences will form themselves into spontaneous poems. An example is the poem called, "On Market Street," in my book *Psyche Speaks*. I agree with you that there is something moving, not yet center stage, but alive on the edges. It needs to be fed.

KR: Yes. I hope my work in some way feeds it. I know there are many others feeding it as well.

RL: I have been saved by dreams, visions and poems too. For you, does this remain fresh and alive? Is it still true for you, or has it become "old hat," after all the interviews, the public performances, and all the public "stuff."

KR: No, it has never become old hat for me. This is especially true when I have someone like you who can listen and get new articulation out of me, when there is someone who can meet me in the conversation. I am always surprised by what I learn in such conversations. I went to the gym today. I use the time on the treadmill or bicycle to learn new poems by heart. It's the best way for me to learn them; that or driving. Rudolph Steiner knew about this when he taught kids multiplication tables while they were moving. Something about moving and learning by heart—they go together. I was learning Margaret Atwood's "Marsh Languages." As soon as I'm over the threshold of it, just to myself on the machine, I'm in wonderland, I'm in bliss. Another one I've been working with is the "The Idea of Order at Key West" by Wallace Stevens. One cannot recite this to most people. It is a poem that is not instantly "gettable." But I go into a personal bliss when I recite this poem even though I've known it by heart since I was seventeen years old. So the answer is no. It never gets old.

RL: The focus of the issue where this interview will be published is "dreams and money." I'm aware of your harrowing experience with money you described in *Saved By A Poem*. It's almost everyone's worst nightmare. Do you have anything new to say about this, the trauma of it, the outcome of it, how dreams or poems played a part in how you suffered through that.

KR: The book talks about how I truly was saved by a poem in the moment when I learned that I had lost all my money. It was the Bernard Madoff thing. I don't know that I would call it a trauma because there is so much goodness that has come out of it. Yes, I wish I had that money. But on the practical level, it wasn't a vast amount of money. I didn't have a vast amount to lose, but it was my life savings. It never would have seen me through my retirement anyway. But it was everything I

had. The influx of kindness that came to me in that moment from friends and family was extraordinary. As soon as I had heard on the voice mail that I had lost this money, all I could think about was Naomi Shehab Nye's poem, "Kindness."

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go...

The first gift was that poem. It opened my world to the world of people who weren't privileged and safe the way I had been my whole life. Then the poem showed me not only "becoming kind by going through loss," but receiving kindness when people started to help and support me. The poem was more about that. It was impossible to receive this before, because I had everything. I was terrified of my own needs so didn't have to confront them; I could hide in the fact that I was financially comfortable. Then the third gift was that the fact I lost the money to Madoff and at the last minute I put that section in the book. The press was held up in order to include this story. The fact that this happened was the hook that got the book visibility in the *New Yorker* and in Ophra's O. The Madoff story generated it for me; I could not have done it myself. People were not terrified by the word "poem." People could understand it because of the Madoff story.

RL: What a gift!

KR: There is a good chance I may get some of it back. Barbara Picower, when her husband died, gave back more than seven billion to the recovery trustee, which makes it possible for many of the people to get at least something back. There is little press about her. I want someone to do her biography! We hear all this other stuff, awful horrifying stuff about the negativities in the financial sector. But here's a woman who did an extreme act of kindness and generosity that she did not have to do. This is really changing history.

RL: Now that's a high note to end on. Thank you so much Kim for giving readers of *Dream Network Journal* a glimpse into your world and sharing it with us.