

*Tricycle Talks*

“Don’t Despair of This Falling World”

Episode #92 with Jane Hirshfield

September 13, 2023



*Note: Transcripts are generated using a combination of speech recognition software and human transcribers. Please check the corresponding audio before quoting in print.*

**Jane Hirshfield:** There's always the intention of questioning, perhaps, which is you say to each moment, “Who are you?” And I find that a really helpful way to go through my minutes and hours and days as a human being: not to have my first impulse be to assert something but to have my first impulse be to ask something.

**James Shaheen:** Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I’m James Shaheen, and you just heard Jane Hirshfield. Jane is a poet, essayist, and translator, as well as a Tricycle contributing editor. Her new book, *The Asking: New and Selected Poems*, invites readers to resist fixity and certainty and instead to dwell in not-knowing. In our conversation, we talk about the questions she’s been asking recently, why she views poetry as an antidote to despair, and how she sees the relationship between her poetry and her Zen practice. Plus, she reads a few poems from her new collection. So here’s my conversation with Jane.

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**James Shaheen:** So I'm here with poet Jane Hirshfield. Hi, Jane. It's great to be with you.

**Jane Hirshfield:** It’s wonderful to be talking with you again.

**James Shaheen:** So Jane, we're here to talk about your new book of poetry, *The Asking: New and Selected Poems*. So to start, can you tell us a little bit about the collection and what inspired you to put it together?

**Jane Hirshfield:** Well, what inspired me to put it together was my editor at Knopf sending me an email saying, “Jane, you're turning 70, and I think it's about time you had a ‘New and Selected



Poems’ out.” And I had said no something like five times before that, so I lost my excuse, which was I had thought it would be premature, and I could no longer claim it would be premature.

It's an odd thing. Artists love having a big retrospective at a museum, and most poets really want a “New and Selected.” But I've always been a little reluctant to sum myself up in any way, and you can't help but feel when you put together a book with fifty years of your own poems in it, there's a little worry that it might be a tombstone volume. I'm quite happy that a little earlier this summer, I went off and wrote a bunch of new poems, and so I know that there is a future after *The Asking*. But maybe you wanted to know more about the book itself and less about the process.

**James Shaheen:** I do want to know about the book. The collection is called *The Asking*, and questions have been a central theme of your work, and they're at the heart of the new collection. So what are some of the questions you've been asking lately?

**Jane Hirshfield:** Well, that's a wonderful thing to ask, and lately and the book are two different questions. You know, I always title my books last, so first you put it together and then you see what's in it. And as you have also noticed, questioning has always been important to me. And that goes back to—well, it probably goes back to childhood because I was always asking questions in childhood, but as a practice issue, it goes back to my very first week of Zen practice when I was a guest student. Actually, my second week.

I was a guest student at Page Street. My first week I was a guest student at Tassajara Monastery. And there was a guest student tea. Soto Zen is not Rinzai Zen. One doesn't work with koans as the main focus of meditation. Stories are told and thought about, but it's not the central practice. And nonetheless, the teacher suggested it's a good idea for you to always have a question in your practice. And over the years, that central practice question has evolved. For a very long time, it was a question that I actually ended up writing about in a special section for *Tricycle*, which is



*What is the emotional life of a Buddha?* So I looked at that question for many years until I felt that I had saturated myself in it and come up with my own answer to that, which is what's held in the essay. And then I had to find a new question. And so the new question of the last quite a few years is one that is I think widely shared, which is, “How can I be of service?”

I look at this world from the perspective of someone who, when I was young, just starting adulthood, the very first Earth Day took place in 1970. And I thought it was going to be attended to. You know, we had seen the first picture of the whole earth. We understood in 1970 about the crisis of the biosphere, about extinctions. The science of climate change has evolved a great deal since then, but we really understood since far before 1970 that the fossil fuel economy was not good for living beings, not good for us in terms of the economics of it, not good for us in terms of the environmental damage of it, not good for us in terms of our relationship to our sources of happiness, our sources of resilience, of taking care of things, as if this Earth and our lives were not disposable.

And so over the decades, I entered in great hope that this was all going to be addressed, and disappointments have been endless. And so in recent years, my question has been How can I serve? How can I help? What can I do? How can I add my one molecule to the tiller of change?

**James Shaheen:** Right, in one of your poems, I sense some frustration. You're admonishing us, all of us, including yourself, not to pretend that we didn't know.

**Jane Hirshfield:** Oh, yes, yes. Should I read the poem? That's a pretty central poem.

**James Shaheen:** Sure.

**Jane Hirshfield:** So that poem is “Let Them Not Say,” and I wrote it in 2014 as a poem about the crisis of the biosphere and climate. And when I wrote it, it frightened me and I felt it had

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worked to do, and I didn't just send it out to be published anywhere. I held onto it because it felt to me like a poem that wanted to do some real work. And as it turned out, it ended up going out from the Academy of American Poets on their Poem-a-Day, which goes to many, many, hundreds and thousands of people now, on the day of the last president's inauguration, so January 20th, 2017. And so a poem which began as an environmental poem became also a political poem. It's a poem looking from the point of view of the future, which will look at us and know what we did or didn't do.

“Let Them Not Say”

Let them not say: we did not see it.

We saw.

Let them not say: we did not hear it.

We heard.

Let them not say: they did not taste it.

We ate, we trembled.

Let them not say: it was not spoken, not written.

We spoke,

we witnessed with voices and hands.

Let them not say: they did nothing.

We did not-enough.

Let them say, as they must say something:

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A kerosene beauty.

It burned.

Let them say we warmed ourselves by it,

read by its light, praised,

and it burned.

The poem is hoping to make itself incomprehensible. If the poem were fully heard and acted upon, someone reading it two hundred years from now, should say, “What was she so worried about? Why was she so worried?” I hope it is a poem that will become meaningless for having been written.

**James Shaheen:** Well, thank you. That was lovely and chilling, and we warm ourselves to it.

**Jane Hirshfield:** Well we do. You know, I fly in airplanes, I turn my lights on. I am complicit.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah. So you write from your earliest work, you have investigated justice. It's always been a concern in your poetry. So how do you understand justice? I've often thought about this because in Buddhism I try to understand where the parallel is to our own sense of justice in the Western cultural sphere. So what is the relationship between justice and asking?

**Jane Hirshfield:** Well, justice is one name for the *paramitas*, for the world going rightly or wisely, however you want to translate the paramitas or the eightfold path. Justice to me is what things look like when each of us recognizes our inseparability from the whole, and each of us is able to live inside some sense that that is actually how we are enacting our social contract with one another, our compact of coexistence, not only with human beings but with all beings, with

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the planet itself. You know, I love that a very few countries have begun to give the environment legal standing as if it were a person in their justice systems.

A river needs justice. A human being needs justice. Even a mosquito has its own sense of justice, I imagine. And sometimes these things are at odds, and always it is difficult. It is just difficult. Perhaps the closest we can come to actual justice is to say we tried our best, that we are always aware that we did not enough, and we are always trying to do better.

It has to do with dignity. It has to do with equity. I think often these days of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and how if a person does not feel safe, is not housed, is not fed, they cannot act in ways that allow the next levels of the hierarchy to come into being because they are frightened or they are angry.

So taking care of our most basic needs in a way where you don't have the 0.1 percent having so much more than any human being or family could ever need and then so many people homeless on the streets of San Francisco or New York or Los Angeles, that's something about justice.

There's a piece which people can find if they look for it. The title is “Justice for Windows,” and it was published in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and it talks about the different systems and understandings and evolution of justice, including the Buddhist system of justice, which seems to me to actually be karma, that Buddhism doesn't have Western retributive or even restorative justice. Buddhism has the idea of karma as how justice works in our lives, and I tend to think of karma in a way that has less to do with future lives and more to do with this very moment. If I behave badly, I feel the stab of that immediately. I don't need to be reborn as a spider.



**James Shaheen:** You mentioned people are frightened and angry, and that probably describes all of us, to some extent anyway, and I wonder what you see as the role of the poet and what you call failures of justice and compassion.

**Jane Hirshfield:** Poetry can be used in many ways for many purposes. You know, I don't want to pretend it is completely an act which always includes interconnection and empathy and all of the values that those on the path of practice are trying to raise in one another and in ourselves. There are war poems. There are angry poems. There are silly poems, which might be more neutral. But for me, when I look at how poems work in our lives, I see in their very fabric there is empathy and interconnection. The very act of entering another person's language and hearing it inside yourself as if it was your own is an act of permeability and a recalibrating sense of we are not separate from one another.

And similarly, inside a poem, all of the devices of poetry, the sound devices, the music, the landscape of metaphor, and how we take in an image. If you read a line about a mountain, you cannot understand the mountain without becoming it for an instant within yourself or becoming the creature walking on the mountain and feeling that steepness in your legs and seeing the sharpness or smoothness of the surfaces or seeing the many beings who are inhabiting the mountain with you.

And so simply to actually participate in any work of art is to lower the barricades between yourself and other beings. And so poetry, by its own fabric of what it is and how it works is already, I choose to believe, is an act that moves the psyche towards the values of practice, the hopes of practice, the vows of practice.

Then within particular poems, for me, I can't speak for everyone, but for me, every poem I write is an act of trying to discover a larger and changed and new way of seeing in the face of the evidence and experience of existence. And so many poems are written when I feel inadequate to



some event. So for example, the poem that I read at the start, “Let Them Not Say,” that was written out of grief and the sense of my own impotence before the disaster that we are all witnessing more and more, 2014 until now. I mean, you today in New York are in the extraordinary heat emergency, which has been in this country and in the world going forth all summer this year. Everywhere people are experiencing unprecedented heat spells lasting longer temperatures, higher health conditions more perilous.

And we look at this, and the question is, “What can I do?” Because I am a poet, I can do a few things. My daily practice for many years was to take some political action every single day having nothing to do with being a poet: donations, sending letters, sending postcards. For the moment, I've pretty much settled on postcards, helping people register to vote or encouraging people to vote. But then sometimes I get to do something as myself, not just as one more set of hands pitching in in a way more intimate than the donation I might also be making. And when I'm doing it as myself, this is what I am. I'm a poet. I'm not a union organizer. I'm not a giver of speeches or recorder of TikToks. And so what I can do then is write a poem and make that poem available and say that poem when the opportunity arises and hope that because the poem changed me first, that it might help change someone else once it's been written.

I write them to change myself. I write them to see more clearly, largely, compassionately, less from the small self and more from the large self. And so those changes are in the poem because they are why it became a poem in the first place, and perhaps someone else reading the poem will go through the same experience and move, for instance, from anger or incomprehension to compassion.

**James Shaheen:** You’ve written about writing poetry as an antidote to despair. So I think of that from your personal point of view. That's really wonderful. I think it has a like effect on the people who read it. Certainly when I read your collection, it worked in that way. Without diminishing the sense of urgency, the despair was somewhat attenuated with this call to action,





and I found that very important. But while poetry is often marginalized in our culture, although there remains a strong interest in it, it really does ripple out in unexpected ways. I was in Shakespeare in the park a few days ago and watched *Hamlet*, and it's like the English language's greatest hits. Nearly every line is a proverb, and I thought, whether people look at this or not or listen to this or not, the ripple effect of that poetry has shaped the language itself. So I wonder sometimes how you think of that ripple effect. Whether people read it or not, it does have an effect. I hope that inspires and encourages you.

**Jane Hirshfield:** Well, it does, and also I've always loved something that T. S. Eliot said, which was that it doesn't matter who writes the great poems, only that they be written. And so I take great solace from the lines that other people write. As a poet, if you've written one line which actually outlasts your life and goes on helping people, that's pretty extraordinary. Maybe I will; maybe I won't. I'll never know about it. But I do remember so clearly when September 11th happened, two poems circulated so widely. One was Auden and the other was Adam Zagajewski.

And those poems, people needed poems in those moments. And the poems were there to serve. And that is the point of poetry: to be there, yes, for the people who read a poem every day or every week or pick up a book once a month perhaps or find individual poems in the pages of *Tricycle* and other journals, and every once in a while one truly reaches them and then they copy it down or they give it to another person. But every person, I believe, at the moments of greatest change and greatest crisis, they are thirsty for a sentence or two which will companion them and help them find their way through the tunnel. And so poems are almost always read at funerals and memorial services, and poems are almost always read at weddings.

And again, to be unseemingly personal about it, *Tricycle* published a wedding poem that I wrote. A friend was on their way to France to another friend's wedding and asked me if I could suggest a poem, and I looked and looked and looked at all of the usual suspect wedding poems, and I was



quite dissatisfied with all of them. I finally gave him a poem by e. e. cummings and said, “I think this is the best that I can find for you. You might want to change this one word.”

Having done that and having thought I had discharged my responsibility to this request, I then started thinking, *Why am I so dissatisfied with all of these poems? What is it that makes me feel they're not right?* Because people have been reading them at weddings for a long time. And you know, it usually had something to do with either it was for too specific an occasion, you know, written for one particular couple and one particular occasion, or they seemed to me poems better said by one beloved to the other beloved and not by a member of the witnessing friends and family.

And then I, being me, had the question, *Well, what would a wedding poem look like? What do I think would make one that worked?* And I sat down to my great surprise and wrote one and gave it to him, and he loved it and he read it at the wedding. And then it sat in a drawer quietly steeping, because it's not a regular lyric poem. It's different. It's a ceremonial poem. It's a ritual. And it might have sat in that bottom drawer forever, except *Tricycle* had for a while, on the inside back cover you were offering things having to do with rituals, and I was asked if I had something to suggest and I said, “Well, you know, this poem is completely non-Buddhist. There's nothing dharma, you know, explicit about it, but it certainly is a ritual. Would you like it?” And I gave it to you, and it started getting read at weddings all over after that and now has become itself one of the usual suspect wedding poems. It's quite extraordinary.

**James Shaheen:** Well, like the wedding poems, some of your poems read like imagined rituals or liturgies like “Spell to Be Said Before Sleep” or “Invocation.” So I'm curious, how do you think about poetry in relation to ritual and prayer, and are there any Zen rituals that inspire your poetry?



**Jane Hirshfield:** Oh, that second question. I'll answer the first one and then I'll try to have my unconscious be working on the second one. So a poem is very much akin to a ritual for a rite of passage. I've been very interested in rites of passage ever since I took an anthropology course in high school and read, a man named Turner wrote a book called *The Ritual Process*, and that was kind of a life-changing book for me, not least because it talks about how in any rite of passage, there is a moment when a person is no longer the old self and not yet the new self. They are in a state of threshold of liminality, and that idea has informed my life ever since.

And I think that perhaps the strongest experience of liminality I have ever known in my own life was a Buddhist rite of passage, so I am getting to the second part of your question, which was when you go to Tassajara, to the monastery, when you go to enter to stay there as a practicing student, you do what in my era was five days of what's called *tangaryo*. Tangaryo is a ritualized reenactment of the earlier practice of a monk would simply arrive at the monastery gate and sit outside until taken in.

So there is no form. When you are in the zendo sitting your five days of tangaryo, the only requirement is that you not leave. You stay on your zafu. There are no defined meditation periods unless it's an hour when the rest of the sangha is also in the zendo for meditation. But for long hours in the middle of the day, there's no *kinhin*, there's no walking meditation. There's nothing but you sitting there, and you are so much no one that the year that I was there, they were doing construction projects in the zendo while we were sitting there. You just didn't count. You were no one and nothing. And it was physically for me almost unbearable because I don't have a body that was actually meant to sit with its legs crossed. I never have, even from childhood. And so in all my years in the monastery, I was there for three years and I don't think I sat more than three periods of zazen when I wasn't in pain. Always, there were pain issues.



But I adored the experience of being no one. It just felt, this is a paradoxical thing to say, it felt such a deeply human thing to not be Jane, to just be this ignored intention, the intention to manage to stay to practice. And so of course that was informing and life-changing.

And part of what I was informed of by the ritual of tangaryo, and also seven-day sesshins, which were equally quite difficult for this body that was determined to stay on the zafu and wasn't built for that, I learned that pain doesn't matter so much, no matter how hard it is, that you can survive it.

In any period of zazen, part of what is being learned is that whatever your experience is, you can simply stay with it. You need not run away. You need not be frightened. You need not reject it. Your only job is to stay on the meditation cushion and be with it and notice that eventually something will change because something always changes.

And I think that was a very good instruction to me for practice, for leading my emotional life ever going forward, and for what it is that I am interested in as a poet, which is to not turn away from anything.

There is a famous sentence from the Roman poet Terence, “Nothing human is alien to me.” I think sitting on the zafu and seeing who visits and who you are in all of those hours and weeks and months and years from when I was 21 years old and arrived at Tassajara until now, this is identical to the practice of writing poetry, which is that you see what arises, and you notice if there's anything you might want to do to help what arises unfold into something larger and deeper.

And so there's always the intention of questioning perhaps, which is you say to each moment, “Who are you?” You say to yourself, “Who am I?” You say to each other person that you meet, “Are you a Buddha? What is your teaching? What is this teaching?” And I find that a really



helpful way to go through my minutes and hours and days as a human being: not to have my first impulse be to assert something but to have my first impulse be to ask something.

**James Shaheen:** You often write about approaching something you haven't looked at closely before or something you've taken for granted, and sometimes the result is destabilizing. It causes us as readers to look again at what we think we know. Whether it's a leaf, a frozen egg, or a cat on a shelf. Suddenly the common occurrence becomes unfamiliar. And I was wondering if you could say something more about the process of defamiliarization.

**Jane Hirshfield:** Well, I think that is one way that poetry is very much like the awareness that comes with practice, which is—we could name it perhaps Suzuki Roshi's beginner's mind—that you are always hoping to be inside whatever moment it is you find yourself inside of as if it were new to you, as if you didn't know what it is, as if you weren't able to think about making your grocery list while you're washing the dishes.

Just to be in this moment is always to see it newly and freshly, and that is the goal of practice, and that is the goal of writing a poem. If I see nothing new, if I see nothing unfamiliar, if I make no discovery, there's no poem to be written. And so every poem makes some kind of a recalibration of my understanding of experience.

If you are reading it on the page, it's because I saw something I hadn't seen before, and then when I look at the poem after it's written, I think, “Oh, maybe somebody else will find this interesting also.” And so then I will publish the poem.

**James Shaheen:** That is what the effect of “Two Kerosene Lanterns” had on me. I love that poem because I thought I was familiar with that. Maybe I was familiar with one aspect, and that



became a habit, and I was no longer able to see anything else. So why don't you read that poem for us? Because there's a perspectival shift that really all of a sudden it's from the view of the cat.

**Jane Hirshfield:** Yes, and I will add that for me, there was a real question which led to that poem. So first, actual experience happened. I'm describing something which very much did happen. And after it happened, what I thought was, when something like what's described in the poem occurs, why do we not only close our eyes, we actually put our hands over our eyes? It's perfectly useless. You know, it's not as though broken glass was going to come flying up into my eyes where I was located. And we do this for emotional crises also. We literally put our hands over our eyes and I was thinking, what is that? And that became this poem.

“Two Kerosene Lanterns”

The cat walks the narrow shelf beneath the window  
where many delicate things are arranged—polished ammonites,  
a dried starfish, three turtle netsuke,  
a few curls of birch bark, two long-unused kerosene lanterns.

As if on their own, two hands fly up to cover the person’s face,  
to cover the eyes already closed.

The crash, as it must, arrives.

The hands lower slowly.

The cat sits on the floor in the room’s middle, calmly licking one paw.

The law of cats is simple: one arrangement becomes another.



People are strange.

**James Shaheen:** I love that.

**Jane Hirshfield:** Thank you. So my question about why was I covering my eyes becomes the cat. Cats are very good practitioners of, you know, things change. And, of course, that kerosene lantern is the same lantern as was in the earlier poem, the kerosene burning in “Let Them Not Say,” and those go back to when I was at Tassajara. It was before the era of solar panels and batteries, and we all lived by kerosene light for three years. And so kerosene lamps have stayed with me. If I swiveled my computer, I could show you the lamp. It's still right over my shoulder.

**James Shaheen:** It didn't break.

**Jane Hirshfield:** Something else did.

**James Shaheen:** About breaking up the familiar, it also happens at the level of syntax and grammar, and I guess we often find this in poetry, but sometimes in reading your poetry, in fact, you did a short interview with us that's in the August issue. You dropped verbs and initially the managing editor and I said, “Wait a second. This has been dropped. A word has been dropped.” And then we realized, “Oh, she's doing this several times.” What was unfamiliar and jarring sort of developed its own rhythm, and we looked at things a little bit differently. So what can you say about dropping those verbs, say, and all of a sudden we're forced to pay closer attention?

**Jane Hirshfield:** I think you might've just answered your own question. It is all about attention. It is all about distillation. So often when I teach poetry, one of the things that I tell my students is for every moment of your reader's attention, you must give them more than the moment of their life that they have given you.



Part of it is you have to, by using language with more concentration and distillation to it, you are inviting people to give you that attention, which you then must repay more than amply. There's a cowboy saying of putting ten pounds of rice into a five-pound sack. And, you know, in cowboy context, I think that's meant to be an insult. But in practice context, it's high praise.

And the other thing, of course, is that no act of communication is one-sided. It always is a collaboration of two. And if you say everything, if you spell everything out, you become incredibly tedious, and people tune out. Nobody likes to be lectured at. Nobody likes not to be left to draw some conclusions of their own.

And so I leave gaps in my poems all the time because I trust you to fill them in. I trust the intelligence and fullness of the reader, of the listener, to bring themselves into this collaborative conversation you're making, whether it's in a podcast or in a poem on a page. You get to do your own part, and I rely on you doing your own part.

**James Shaheen:** It seems like you also sometimes trust the earth itself to fill in those gaps in the poems. Is that crazy or what?

**Jane Hirshfield:** No, that's so poetically said. I'm very impressed. Yeah, we do. One of my lifelong abiding support teachings has been, again, something I heard very early in my entrance time to Zen practice, which was the suggestion that Buddhist practice rests on a tripod: great effort, great faith, which I think can be translated as great trust, and great doubt. And the idea of those being the three legs that one works with has been really central to me.

Don't-know mind, as we all first heard, I think, from the Korean Zen Master Seung Sahn, it is no different from the Romantic English poet Keats talking about negative capability: if someone is going to be an artist, they must be willing to live without irritable reaching towards fact and reason. That was Keats's phrasing of it. And I think abiding in uncertainty, abiding in doubt,





questioning everything is central, but equally central is the trust that you will not fall into an abyss if you surrender your certainty.

Certainty makes me at least at great risk of arrogance and wrong-headedness. I'm quite worried about people who are utterly certain that they're right because people who are certain that they're right will do terrible things in the service of their certainty, whereas people who have a little doubt—*What if I'm wrong?*—then there is some possibility that we will not do terrible things because we believe in the rightness of our cause, because we believe that ends justify means. No. Means are our lives. Means are the moments of our lives. How we treat one another in any moment must be the embodiment of whatever it is we hope for, wish for, but perhaps are not so certain of. I could be wrong about all of this.

**James Shaheen:** What you make me think about when I'm caught in my habitual way of thinking, I usually think I'm right and I'm usually pretty unhappy and very inflexible. But that brings something up. You talked about living in the wilderness in your early days of Zen practice. You mentioned the lanterns. You had no electricity. I think you had to fetch your own water. There was no heat. And being a Californian myself originally, I know how cold and damp those nights can be. And you invite it after a while, the discomfort. You look forward not masochistically but with curiosity about what that discomfort is. And because you were talking about certainty, I wonder about the discomfort of sitting with an unanswered question, that doubt that you talk about. How can we learn—I mean, I don't want to be comfortable with it necessarily because that might defeat the purpose, but there is a discomfort. We naturally as people reach for answers. Sometimes I wonder, how do we then just sit with it?

**Jane Hirshfield:** How I have come to feel about all of the difficult emotions, and amongst them is not only the discomfort of uncertainty and doubt, but also, to me, the two excruciating difficult emotions are anxiety and embarrassment or shame. They are almost unbearable. And what I realized at some point was this is information we need to have. It is useful information.



Evolution made us social creatures, beings who need to know when we have transgressed. If you are not able to feel discomfort, to feel anxiety, to feel embarrassment, how would you know that you weren't following the eightfold path with great fidelity?

Another sentence I remember from those days was the teaching that the reason to follow all the Buddhist vows, the prohibitory vows, not abuse the senses, not abuse sexuality, don't kill somebody, don't take what isn't given, and, my favorite one for its complexity, don't possess anything, not even the dharma. I love that one. The teaching was, if you do any of those things, you're going to spend your time on the cushion being disturbed by them. And so being disturbed is information we need because it tells us that we might want to do something differently going forward. It's useful information. All the negative emotions and all the positive emotions are useful information. They're also, of course, the very texture and fabric of our lives.

A favorite poem, not by me, but one I co-translated for the collection, *The Ink Dark Moon*, is a poem by the thousand-year-ago woman poet Izumi Shikibu at the Heian court in Japan. And what she said was, “Although the wind blows terribly here, the moonlight also leaks between the roof planks of this ruined house.” And that was a life-changing poem for me to read. When I went to translate it with my co-translator, I had all the words.

I knew something was there, but I knew I didn't understand what I was meant to be taking from the data my co-translator had given me. And it took me a week to figure it out. And then when I figured it out, I understood what it is saying is if you live in a house which is impermeable to the cold winds and storms and difficulties of this world, you will also wall yourself off from the moonlight, from everything you want, from awakening, from enlightenment, from the fullness of love, whatever the moonlight might stand for to you.

You don't get part of a human life without feeling all of it. You don't get to love without knowing that you are going to lose the one you love or they will lose you. It is inevitable. This is how our



lives unfold. And so it really led to what you were describing a little while ago, this feeling of saying yes to the difficult, affirming the difficult. Poem after poem after poem in the book is me finding my way to that again because you don't get to solve these questions once. They will come back to us all of our lives.

**James Shaheen:** What I really love about the Shikibu poem is that the house has to be ruined in order for the moonlight to get in. And also it reminds me of Leonard Cohen talking about the cracks are where the light gets in. It's a similar kind of sensibility.

**Jane Hirshfield:** Yes, almost the same image.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, and I'm sure he read the poem, at some point anyway.

**Jane Hirshfield:** Oh, I wonder. I'd have to look at when he composed that song versus when *The Ink Dark Moon* was published. I don't know offhand what year he wrote that particular song. It was late though, so maybe so. On the other hand, all these truths are available for anyone to find.

**James Shaheen:** Before I ask you to read a few poems, I just wanna ask you about one line that I remember you said. I couldn't find it online, and so maybe I've got it wrong. You tell me if I do, but when I read your book, this latest collection, I'm not thinking about Zen. I'm not thinking about Buddhism, and I remember your one saying that in the end, there is no Zen; there's just life. Is that right?

**Jane Hirshfield:** I believe you. I don't remember most things I've ever said, but that sounds like me because I've always felt that any human truth has to be available whether you have a particular vocabulary description of it or not. If there is truth in Zen, it must be available to

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people who live in places where they never would've heard the word “Zen” or any of the dharma teachings. If there is truth in the dharma, it is a human truth, and it can be found.

**James Shaheen:** Thank you, Jane. So to close, would you be willing to read a couple of poems from the new collection? The first would be “Counting, New Year's Morning, What Powers Yet Remain to Me,” and the other is “Each Morning Calls Us to Praise This World That Is Fleeting.”

**Jane Hirshfield:** Yes, I'm delighted to do that. And the first poem, the last line of it is where the book found its title. I tend to write a poem every New Year's day. They don't all see print. This one did.

“Counting, New Year's Morning, What Powers Yet Remain to Me”

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.

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For 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 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 as though from a friend—

*don't despair of this falling world, not yet      didn't it give you the asking*

“Each Morning Calls Us to Praise This World That Is Fleeting”

Each morning  
waking  
amidst the not-ever-before,  
dressing inside the not-ever-again.

Under sunlight or cloud,  
brushing the hair.

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Not yet arrived

at the end-crimped finish,

drinking coffee

and buttering toast.

Permitted to slip into coat, into shoes,

I go out,

I count myself part,

carrying only

a weightless shadow,

whose each corner joins and departs

from the shadows of others.

Mortal, alive among others

equally fragile.

And with luck—

for days even, sometimes—

this luxury, this extra gift:

able to even forget it.

**James Shaheen:** Jane, thank you so much. It's been a real pleasure.

**Jane Hirshfield:** Well, thank you. I have always loved any chance I've had to do anything with you and the Tricycle community. I so appreciate this conversation, James. Thank you.

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**James Shaheen:** Thank you, Jane. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *The Asking: New and Selected Poems*, available now. Thanks again, Jane.

**Jane Hirshfield:** Take care.

**James Shaheen:** You’ve been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Jane Hirshfield. To read an interview with Jane in the August issue of *Tricycle*, visit [tricycle.org/magazine](http://tricycle.org/magazine). We’d love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at [feedback@tricycle.org](mailto:feedback@tricycle.org) to let us know what you think. If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. To keep up with the show, you can follow Tricycle Talks wherever you listen to podcasts. *Tricycle Talks* is produced by Sarah Fleming and The Podglomerate. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!