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**Ada Limón:** I'm interested in the way that as writers we can think of our work as offerings, as things that go out into the world and do work beyond us. When I think of loving-kindness as an offering that spirals outward, poems can do that, too. And I think that there's a lot to be said for reimagining the work of poetry as offering something back to the planet, recognizing the reciprocal relationship between us and the natural world. Too often we think of that relationship as being severed, as being broken, as being a relationship that causes harm. I think if we can offer something, like a poem, back to a tree, back to a river, back to a creek, back to the birds, then that can be a new relationship with the art of making something.

**James Shaheen:** Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, and you just heard Ada Limón. Ada is the 24th Poet Laureate of The United States and the author of six books of poetry. Her most recent project, *You Are Here: Poetry in the Natural World*, is a collection of poetry that she edited in collaboration with the Library of Congress focused on how poetry can help connect us to the natural world. In my conversation with Ada, we talk about how poems bring us into the present moment, her practice of loving-kindness and how it influences her writing, why she believes poetry can help us decenter our sense of self, and how writing can be an act of offering something back to the planet. Plus, Ada reads a few poems from her recent collections. So here's my conversation with Ada Limón.

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**James Shaheen:** Okay, so I'm here with US Poet Laureate Ada Limón. Hi, Ada. It's great to be with you.

**Ada Limón:** Thank you so much for having me. It's great to be here.

*Tricycle Talks*

“US Poet Laureate Ada Limón on Returning to Wonder”

Episode #109 with Ada Limón

August 28, 2024



**James Shaheen:** So, Ada, we're here to talk about your latest project, *You Are Here: Poetry in the Natural World*, a collection of poetry that you edited in collaboration with the Library of Congress. To start, could you tell us a bit about the project and what inspired it? And in particular, could you let us know the story behind the title?

**Ada Limón:** Yeah, thank you. When I first was asked to serve as the 24th Poet Laureate of the United States, I knew I would be asked to do a signature project. Even on those very early days, I knew I wanted it to be something with poetry and nature. I am someone who has quite an imagination, so I had lots of ideas, including flying a plane that would have poems on native seed packets to reforest lands that had been damaged by fire and making poems that would cross the Rio Grande. Then eventually, slowly but surely, I came up with the idea of *You Are Here: Poetry in the Natural World*.

One of the reasons it has its name is that I was on a hike at Raven Run in Kentucky, and I was trying to figure out which way to go. As I was examining my options, I saw the little red dot that says, “You are here.” I was thinking a lot about how to be of service in this role: What are the things that mean a lot to me? What are the things that in my particular body and being and iteration on this planet I can bring into fruition? And the words “You are here” felt like not just a title but a mantra.

There are two elements to the project. The first is an anthology, which includes fifty original contemporary poems by some of our best poets writing today. All of them are speaking back to the natural world in some way. I wanted it to be a kind of reclaiming of nature poetry, a new nature poem for this time, for this moment.

The second element is *You Are Here: Poetry in Parks*, putting poetic installations in seven different national parks around the country that represent the seven different regions of the national parks. Those poems are sort of iconic poems of place. I've been going around to these



beautiful parks and unveiling these poetic installations. They're basically these giant poems on picnic tables that people can gather around. It's been really wonderful.

That's how the poem project came to be, and I'm so happy that we landed on this one and that we were able to partner with the National Park Service and the Poetry Society of America and really bring poetry into these beautiful areas and hopefully add a little moment of reflection while people enter these spaces. It's been a really remarkable last six weeks of unveiling the poems.

**James Shaheen:** So are these installations across the country in various national parks? I was just in the Columbia Gorge and I thought maybe you could do one there.

**Ada Limón:** I would love to, I would love to. Yeah, there are seven different parks, and the nice thing about this project as one hopes with any project, I think, is that it will continue without me. Certainly the National Parks will continue without me. But the Poetry Society and the Park Service will be working together to put poems in more parks. We began with Cape Cod National Seashore, in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and put a poem by Mary Oliver in the forest trailhead. And it's amazing. It's overlooking the Blackwater Pond. And then just two days ago, I was in the Great Smoky Mountains, and we unveiled a poem by Lucille Clifton, the great and beautiful, powerful Lucille Clifton, so they are around the country, and the installations will continue, after my service ends in this role.

**James Shaheen:** Nice. You know, you mentioned that you are here functioned as a mantra for you, and I can't help but think of Thich Nhat Hanh's classic book, *You Are Here: Discovering the Magic of the Present Moment*. So could you say more about your relationship to meditation and spiritual practice? How did you first come to meditation?

**Ada Limón:** Yeah, thank you for asking. Meditation is really important to me in my life and in my work. I began meditating in earnest in 2007. I was experiencing what is called labile high blood pressure, and one of the things they suggested was to try meditation. At that time, my



stepmother was also diagnosed with colorectal cancer. All of those things coming together were elevating my heart rate and my blood pressure, and they said that maybe meditation would help. I had read a lot of books and thought I knew what meditation was. I feel like if you're born in California, you have some idea of what meditation is. I was living in New York City, and I started going to the free classes that they offer at the Tibet House on Tuesday nights, and to my great luck, Sharon Salzberg was teaching one of those classes, and she gave me not only an entryway to the real work of meditation but also a structure. Her work in loving-kindness, or metta, practice proved very useful to me, and it's still probably my go-to meditation. It's probably the meditation I use the most in my life, and it was also the meditation that brought me into using it as a daily practice.

**James Shaheen:** Well, I should let our listeners know that Sharon was supposed to be on this podcast, but something else came up for her. I promised her that we would bring Ada back. So there's more to come with Sharon, but for now, everyone's stuck with me. But you just spoke of loving kindness meditation, and I wonder if this influences how you approach poetry.

**Ada Limón:** You know, I think it does. One of the biggest reasons I love poetry, both reading it and writing it, is that it brings you into the present moment. It brings you into the breath work. There's breath built into the page with line breaks, caesuras, and stanza breaks. There's breath there, and it's teaching you to slow down. All of that blank space around the poem is a way of silencing everything else before you enter it. And so the work itself feels like a meditation, but I'm also interested in the way that as writers we can think of our work as offerings, as things that go out into the world and do work beyond us. When I think of loving-kindness as an offering that spirals outward, poems can do that, too. And I think that there's a lot to be said for reimagining the work of poetry as offering something back to the planet, recognizing the reciprocal relationship between us and the natural world. Too often we think of that relationship as being severed, as being broken, as being a relationship that causes harm. I think if we can offer



something, like a poem, back to a tree, back to a river, back to a creek, back to the birds, then that can be a new relationship with the art of making something.

**James Shaheen:** You just mentioned poems as an offering, something manifested out of care and attention but also need. So what are you hoping to offer with this particular collection?

**Ada Limón:** When I was getting my MFA at NYU and while I was learning to pay attention to the legacy of poetry, nature poetry was almost always relegated to the realm of white men. And I wanted to rethink that when it came to poetry, especially poetry about the natural world. I also feel like the kind of nature poetry that was happening back then wasn't speaking back to the climate crisis or the idea of solastalgia, which is missing some place you are in at the moment but recognizing that it's leaving. And I think that we needed a new nature poem to address our complicated and urgent feelings when it comes to nature. For me, the collection was an offering to this moment, as well as to those of us who may not have language for the way we feel about nature, that provides wonder and awe and presence and breath and curiosity but also sometimes provides anxiety, fear, and a sort of sorrowful unease at times because we're not sure what will remain. I hope that these poems allow us to address and think about those complicated feelings and maybe even spur us to some kind of collective action.

**James Shaheen:** Well, along those lines, you also say that this collection aims to be not just a community but an ecosystem made stronger by its parts. So how can poetry function as an ecosystem?

**Ada Limón:** There is a sort of myth in art making in general, which I'm sure we all are familiar with, which is that one exceptional artist rises to the top and wins the prizes and is lauded for their particular idiosyncratic qualities and gift. I think art making is actually much more collective than that, much more communal than that. When you sit down to write a poem, you actually sit down with every poem that's ever been written. Most likely, you've read a lot of



poems, and those lines are moving through you just the way that when you breathe out, the plants are taking that breath in and giving us breath and response.

It feels to me that sometimes we need to do a little reimagining around art making—that it's not done in isolation, that we're never really in isolation, and instead we're creating something that is then read and rebuilt into the world itself. That cycle is just as essential to imagine and tend to as the cycle of reciprocal relationship with the planet.

I think that rethinking the myth of the individual is important right now. There's power in recognizing that you're not alone, and I think poems can do that. I know that I need it. Even in this project, I go on the road, and part of me is thinking, “Oh, this is my job to bring poetry into these spaces and to unveil these poems and to share the anthology.” But really what I found is most of the time my job is to listen and to actually hear about all the poetry that's already being written in these communities and all of the resources and schools and community projects that are already happening. That is something that's been really inspirational to me, and I think we have to remember that because so often it feels as if we're against this massive “No.” Being on the road and going to these parks and talking about poetry in the natural world has really been so much about hearing what other people are doing, and then I leave feeling like, “Oh, we have a chance.” There are people doing this amazing work. They are stewarding this land. They are reforesting places. They are restoring creeks and waterways. That kind of work needs to be highlighted because so much of the good work of people gets overshadowed by the true terror of living in this day and age.

**James Shaheen:** You know, you open the introduction with the story about watching the trees, and you say the trees make you feel at once more and less human. So can you say more about this? What does it mean to feel both more and less human?

**Ada Limón:** Yeah. My friend Dan is a fellow meditator. You know how you always have to have those friends that you can talk to about the experience. And one of the things he said to me once



after meditating was “I’m the least Dan I am when I meditate.” I think that’s true. Looking at trees makes me feel like I am no longer just myself but that I am part of something larger, and that part is very human and very animal at the same time. It’s also not the human that we think of. It’s not the human being that has to go to appointments and check things off the list and pay bills and care for folks. It’s the human that can easily be connected to this larger ecosystem of the world. That feels very useful to me because I can be in my body but also not feel like my body is the end all be all, that there’s something beyond it.

**James Shaheen:** Would you be willing to read a couple of poems that explore this question of identity and community? The first one is from *The Carrying* and it’s called “Time Is on Fire.”

**Ada Limón:** “Time Is on Fire”

I meet a physicist at the party and immediately  
ask him if it’s true that time doesn’t exist, time  
being important to me. Even now I’m older,  
time’s crypt and wish curl around me like ghost wind.  
He doesn’t answer so maybe I don’t exist. One day:  
nothing. Another: mushrooms or mildew, or some  
inching sprout, or some leaf gone black and dead.  
Time does that. The arrow we ride into the now,  
then into the future, does not pull out of the skin  
backward. Or does it? The past is happening.  
Pampas grass slicing the thumb before the dozer  
came and cut the grass out like a cancer, my old cat  
Smoke leaving dead birds on the garden posts,  
the first man, the first woman, the madrone’s rust-  
colored berries of fall, each second is in me. The arrow  
we ride like a horse, mute and fast, retraces and races,

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so that right now even as my valley burns, it rewinds  
too, each black ash rubble pile pulls itself back  
into a dear home, a living cat leaps into the understory,  
and in the soft yellow hills, the first flame goes out.

**James Shaheen:** I also wonder if you could read “Sanctuary” from *The Hurting Kind*.

**Ada Limón:** I'd be happy to.

“Sanctuary”

Suppose it's easy to slip

into another's green skin,

bury yourself in leaves

and wait for a breaking,

a breaking open, a breaking

out. I have, before, been

tricked into believing

I could be both an I

and the world. The great eye

of the world is both gaze

and gloss. To be swallowed

by being seen. A dream.

To be made whole

by being not a witness,

but witnessed.





**James Shaheen:** Thank you. Could you say more about the role of witnessing and being witnessed in these poems?

**Ada Limón:** Yeah, I was in a conversation with a friend who was a producer on the old podcast I did called *The Slowdown*, which is now wonderfully done by Major Jackson and had originally been established by Tracy K. Smith. My friend was saying that she was meeting with an ornithologist, who said that birds notice you more than you notice them. It always stuck with me thinking that here I am thinking I'm watching for birds, but in reality, all the birds notice exactly where I am and where I'm walking and whether I'm moving toward the feeder or the birdbath or to fill fresh water or just in my own silent world.

I think that the idea of being witnessed is important when we think about our relationship to the world because so often we think our job is to be the watcher or the receiver. I think as poets, we think, “OK, my job is to watch and to notice and to pay attention,” and that's beautiful and essential and important. Practicing mindfulness, too, is all about noticing and looking and watching. But there is also a moment in which we are also in someone else's view. The trees are noticing us. The wind is noticing us as it moves around us. Birds are watching us. The lizards that we don't know are there are skittering off and getting darker in their caves and corners as we go by. We hope the snakes stay silent as we walk by.

And I think that that is just another way of being in the world and rethinking ourselves as center. That decentering of the self is so refreshing because we live in this world where you have to think about yourself so much in order to do the good work you want to do in the world. Yet there are times where just being like, “Oh, right now, I'm being noticed, and I wonder what that tree thinks of me now that I'm back home in my valley. I wonder if it's thinking, ‘Oh, you're back, I thought of you, you came back here.’” That to me is really interesting, and it keeps me out of that cycle of centering the human, centering the self, centering my own needs as the essential needs. That's been really important not just in my life but in my poems.



**James Shaheen:** As you were talking, I was thinking of the bird watchers in Central Park. They're looking at something so intently, but countless things are watching them as they do that. And I hadn't really thought of it that way.

**Ada Limón:** Yeah, it's really interesting to realize that sometimes when you notice a bird, a bird is already looking at you.

**James Shaheen:** And all the birds behind you too. Community seems essential to this discentering of the self that you just mentioned, both human and nonhuman community, and you also say that poems are like trees in that they let us breathe together. How so?

**Ada Limón:** One of the ways that poetry is different than prose is oftentimes it's lineated, and even if it's not lineated and it's a prose poem, it works in a specific way with breath. When you read a poem out loud, whether it's yours or someone else's, that poem is allowing you to enter that person's breath. The line breaks tell you when to breathe, when to pause. It's not unlike music in that way. And so you actually enter someone else's breath when you read their poem, and it's a really intimate act to do that. I think that there's sort of a beauty in that community aspect, that if I am reading a poem you wrote, I am entering your breath. And I think there's something so beautiful about that.

**James Shaheen:** As you write, poems can be a place to stop and remember that we too are living. Can you say something about that?

**Ada Limón:** Yeah, I lived in New York City for many years. I love New York. It's my favorite city in the world. The only thing that would ever keep me from the chaos of my own mind was to just practice looking and to remember that, oh, I am living in this moment.



When I was living in New York, I had jobs that were very intense, and I would forget sometimes that I was a body, that I was a being, that I was an animal, and that time was existing within me and that I had a beginning and an end and also was endless.

I think that remembering those things was so important to me when I was rethinking my relationship to work and to art and to life. So often you can just forget that you're living, and in doing so you forget that you're dying. Then, you forget to be present altogether. I always think that one of the easiest ways to remember to love the world is to remember that you have to leave it at some point. That's been a really important remembering for me to do on a regular basis.

When I lost my stepmother in 2010 when she died of cancer, it put everything in perspective for me. She died pretty young. She was only 52. And I kept thinking, What if I died at 52? What would I want to have done? What do I want to have experienced? That really helped me recommit to making poems. She died in February of 2010, and I quit my job in September of 2010 and tried as much as I could to be a full-time writer, which is something I'm still doing now fourteen years later. Sometimes it takes that kind of reminder, as hard as that reminder was. I always think that sometimes people who leave leave us something in return, and the gift she gave me was to remember that this life was a wonder and a gift and to do the most that I could with it. I don't mean that in an urgent doing way but in the way of recognizing it and not missing it.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, this awareness of death runs through your poetry, and one dynamic the collection explores is how to hold multiple conflicting energies at once, including grief and beauty and love and rage. You've talked about this in the context of Federico Garcia Lorca's concept of *duende*, which has four elements: irrationality, earthiness, a close awareness of death, and the diabolical. So could you say more about the concept of *duende* and how you balance darkness and lightness in your poetry?

**Ada Limón:** *Duende* is one of my favorite terms, partly because it feels very difficult to talk about. I think that I've dedicated myself to things that are hard to define, so it would make sense



that I would also like duende. One of the things that Lorca said in his lecture in Buenos Aires in 1928 was that duende is different from the muse. It doesn't come from outside the body. It's different from the visiting angel that's supposed to anoint us and visit us. Duende lives inside of us. It comes up through the soles of our feet. It lives in the bloodstream. I've always maintained that to be true, at least for my own work: It feels like my poems come from something already that exists. It's already there. It's not coming from the outside in.

One of the things that he talks about in that beautiful lecture is that poems have to have an acknowledgement of death, that they have to have this idea that death is present. I think that that is an engine of almost all my work. If you asked me what most of my poems are about, I would say that most of my poems are shouting, “We are all going to die. Didn't you notice?” And I think that that is at the core of my poems, but that is also where the light comes from. That's where I have a moment of saying, “If that is true, how can I not be in wonder? How can I not love this stranger or love this moment?”

And I think that sometimes when we talk about poetry and what poetry can do, I keep thinking that it's not always about hope. It's not always about bringing light. There are a lot of poems that really plummet you into the depths of the soul. They do not bring you out. And so I think poetry's role is really to turn on feeling, to make room for all sorts of feeling and to explore that.

And so in my own work, I've always been interested in balancing that awareness of death, that awareness of truth, of where we are right now, what is damaged about us as a species, what is damaged about us as a society. Those truths are there. They're evident. We're watching them unfold every day. And yet there is still goodness. There's still light, and there are so many people working so hard to protect the natural world, and that work goes unsung because we don't hear about it. We just hear about the hard things. And so in my work, I want to make room for all of it. And the poems that I love make room for all of it. So I think it's about the depth of feeling and the range of feeling that we have.



**James Shaheen:** In this latest collection, you do hold all of those things in balance, and one question that runs through the book is the role of poetry in times of catastrophe. You ask, “How could a poem make a difference? How can a tree make a difference?” So, how have you come to view these questions? And how do you view the role of the artist in the face of crisis?

**Ada Limón:** It's a question that's always been asked of artists and of any of us living through hard times. I think that one of the things that we're supposed to do as artists is to really recognize that it's dangerous to give up. It's very dangerous to not feel and to numb out.

Sometimes when we go through really big catastrophes, when we're careening from one crisis to another, one of the main jobs that we have as artists is to remember that we may not have to have hope, but we have to have some curiosity. We have to have some sort of resilience at this time. And I think that poetry can make room for that. It can help us feel like, “Oh, right. I'm not alone in this feeling.”

It's when we despair alone that it becomes easy to think there's no hope, whereas poetry is complex. It allows for different ways of being: “Wait, I can feel that and that too?” I can lose someone and grieve and feel really deep pain and then also feel a sense of tenderness watching a little lizard go in and out of the rosemary bush or a tenderness to the kind person at the grocery store that just asked how I was in a nice way. We have to make room for all of that, and I think that a poet's job is to do that, to encourage us not to numb.

**James Shaheen:** You quote the poet W. S. Merwin, who wrote, “On the last day of the world, I would want to plant a tree.”

**Ada Limón:** Yeah. I love Merwin, and incidentally, I don't know how much you know about him. I'm sure you know a lot, but he dedicated his life to trees and created an amazing sanctuary of palm trees from all over the world and some seeds that would probably not even exist if it weren't for him saving those specific palms in threatened areas. It's a place in Maui, the Merwin



Conservancy. And I think there's so much hope in the work that he did, even as he was very clear-eyed at where we were and what we were doing to the planet and very clear-eyed about how human beings tend to thrust ourselves into wars. Even with that clear-eyed look into us, into our souls, he was dedicated to planting these trees. And he would go out and haul buckets of water just by himself and plant these trees. And I think one of the reasons he had a very long and beautiful life was that he was dedicated to that work. I think sometimes just a small action, whatever it is, you know, one small action that can make you feel just a little bit useful is really beautiful. And he was such a good example of that as an artist and as a human.

**James Shaheen:** This is a theme you've explored in your own poetry collections as well, and I was wondering if you'd be willing to read a poem from *The Hurting Kind*. It's called “Salvage.”

**Ada Limón:** “Salvage”

On the top of Mount Pisgah, on the western  
slope of the Mayacamas, there's a madrone  
tree that's half-burned from the fires, half-alive  
from nature's need to propagate. One side  
of her is black ash and at her root is what  
looks like a cavity that was hollowed out  
by flame. On the other side, silvery green  
broadleaf shoots ascend toward the winter  
light and her bark is a cross between a bay  
horse and a chestnut horse, red and velvety  
like the animal's neck she resembles. I have  
been staring at the tree for a long time now.  
I am reminded of the righteousness I had  
before the scorch of time. I miss who I was.  
I miss who we all were, before we were this: half



alive to the brightening sky, half dead already.

I place my hand on the unscarred bark that is cool

and unsullied, and because I cannot apologize

to the tree, to my own self I say, I am sorry.

I am sorry I have been so reckless with your life.

**James Shaheen:** Thank you. The image of the half-burned tree feels particularly resonant right now. Could you say something about that?

**Ada Limón:** Yeah, I'm from Glen Ellen in Sonoma, California, which is Northern California, which has always been affected by fire. In 2017, there was a devastating fire that burned an area very close to my heart. And I was thinking about writing a poem and saw this tree. And this tree is, you know, it just is a metaphor right there that it's half burned and half living. I wrote that poem when it was really half and half, and I'll tell you that that tree, you can barely tell it was burned at all right now. You know, I mean, only so many years later, seven years later, and I couldn't recognize it. I just saw it the other day and that tree is just a beautiful living tree. You'd have to look very closely to see the part of it that was burned.

**James Shaheen:** One of our writers lives in Glen Ellen, and so I heard all about the fires back then. Some people lost everything, and it was a poor consolation to say it's just things, and in the next issue, she ponders that. But you mentioned that in addition to the printed anthology, the project also includes installations encouraging the public to pay deeper attention to their surroundings. Could you say more about this part of the project? What are your hopes for these installations?

**Ada Limón:** The poetic installations are oversized picnic tables that are elongated on one side so they can be accessible, so if you're in a wheelchair, you can easily come to the picnic table and be part of the conversation. Because poetry allows you to slow down and because it has breath built into it, and often these poems that I've chosen are about landscape and nature, my hope is



that it provides a moment of reflection where people entering these spaces can sit and witness the world and feel witnessed in a way.

At the end of each poem there's a prompt, which is “What would you write in response to the landscape around you?” You'll note that I didn't say “poem.” I think people can be intimidated by the word “poem.” And so it can be a sentence. It can also be a thought. You're also welcome to write the poem and burn it in the burn pile, or you can write the poem in carrots and eat it. Whatever feels safest to you.

But my thought is to have people recognize that a poem can be an offering, that it can go back into the universe. Maybe what you want to write in response is a thank you. Maybe it's, “I'm sorry.” Maybe it's, “I'll do better,” or maybe it's “You brought me closer to my family member that I came here with,” or “You reminded me of something,” or “You reminded me of being alive and the beauty of this world.” It can be whatever it needs to be for you. I hope people will participate in whatever public or private way they want to. I think private poems are deeply important too. Sometimes you just need to write the poem for yourself.

**James Shaheen:** Well, you very cleverly avoid the use of the word “poem,” and sometimes people can be hesitant to read or write poetry, and they can view it as somehow inaccessible or out of reach. So what do you hope people will learn from trying to write poetry even if they don't think of themselves as poets?

**Ada Limón:** I think that, first of all, trying to make anything is beautiful. Richard Hugo said that writing is a way of saying that you and the world have a chance. I think even putting pen to paper or fingers to keyboard, just that act of writing is already a way of saying you and the world have a chance.

I think that if you practice mindfulness in any way, if you can walk around and notice things and describe things, there's a really wonderful thing that can happen in the body when you work at





really trying to describe what you are noticing in the world. You start to think, “Oh, I know that's a bird and that I know it's called a Steller's jay. And then there's a part of you that feels like, Oh, why does it have a person's name on it? I don't think that that bird wants to be called a Steller's jay. Maybe that bird wants to be called this, you know, whatever it is, you start to really try to describe it and then start to be curious about what it is that you want to describe.

Why is it that you describe that? Why did you choose that? What does it remind you of in your own life? You know, when I start to describe a tree that's half burned and half alive, ooh, that was me. And so, it's not only in what and how we describe, but why do we choose that? And being curious is such a good way to live.

**James Shaheen:** You know, some of your poems read almost like imagined rituals, like “Instructions on Not Giving Up.” Do you view writing as a ritual? And are there any rituals that have been important to you?

**Ada Limón:** You know, I write every day. I write in a notebook by longhand. Let's see if I have it. Yeah. Right here next to me. I just panicked, I didn't have it. Sometimes I set an intention for the day, and then I will often write a list of things that I have to get done, and they go hand in hand with my poems. I used to try to keep two separate journals. One was for my poems because I thought of them as sort of these sacred objects, things that I was intentionally doing, and then my to-do lists had to be separate. And then I realized that, well, it was all one life. If you've ever meditated, you'll know that all the thoughts come at once, and it could be as easy as like, “Oh, I have to go make sure that I get another set of keys made for my mom,” or it's these big existential crises of something looming that's entirely huge and amorphous. They all come at the same time and they all are different thoughts, and I realized that my journal had to make room for all of the things.

So I think the one ritual I do have is to keep the same kind of journal. It's always blank. I don't like lined. I don't like lines. I need to be able to doodle in it if I need to, or draw in it if I need



to. And setting my intention. So that's my ritual for that. And then I do try to write a little bit every day if I can, and sometimes it's just description. And those are the kind of rituals that I do. I'm someone who loves habits. I try to meditate every day, et cetera, but I also am very loose with what happens because I travel a lot. I spend a lot of my time on the road. And so sometimes, you know, with an early morning flight at 4 AM, I'm not going to sit down and write my morning pages that I would love to do if I were home. So I try to be very portable with my rituals, which the notebook is. So it's sort of my little meditation space that I bring with me.

**James Shaheen:** Do those to-do lists ever turn into poems?

**Ada Limón:** I think that they do sometimes. I think that I'm interested in list-making in general and the way the brain likes a list. That feels very interesting to me, the curiosity that I have around lists. You know, for a while, every article had a, and maybe that's still the case, you know, “ten things you must do,” “five things you must do.” I'm always suspicious of that. And so I think that part of me does play with any of those kinds of forms and try to turn them on their head a little bit.

**James Shaheen:** So one last question before we close. You recently wrote a poem that will be released into space. It's called “In Praise of Mystery: A Poem for Europa.” Would you be willing to read that poem and tell us how it came about?

**Ada Limón:** Yeah, thank you. I was asked by the folks at NASA to write an original poem that would be engraved on the Europa Clipper, which will travel 1.8 billion miles to the second moon of Jupiter called Europa, which is an icy moon that is primarily made of water. For years, scientists have posited that it has all the ingredients for life, and so they're going up to test the plumes of water and see if indeed it is true that it might have all the ingredients for life.

For this exploratory mission, they asked me to create a poem that would be engraved on this spacecraft in my own handwriting. And it was interesting that you brought up Merwin because I

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was staying at the Merwin Conservancy when I wrote this poem. And of course, it was, as you might imagine, a really difficult prompt to try to write a poem that would be engraved on a spacecraft in my own handwriting, and the thing that helped me the most, aside from my husband saying, “You need to stop writing a NASA poem and start writing a poem you would actually write,” and kudos to my dear husband for knowing me and knowing what I needed. But the other part of it was that it was a poem that had to point back to this planet, to this earth. And so as much as it's a poem that reaches outward, it's a poem that comes right back here and points inward to us here on this planet.

“In Praise of Mystery: A Poem for Europa”

Arching under the night sky inky  
with black expansiveness, we point  
to the planets we know, we

pin quick wishes on stars. From earth,  
we read the sky as if it is an unerring book  
of the universe, expert and evident.

Still, there are mysteries below our sky:  
the whale song, the songbird singing  
its call in the bough of a wind-shaken tree.

We are creatures of constant awe,  
curious at beauty, at leaf and blossom,  
at grief and pleasure, sun and shadow.

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And it is not darkness that unites us,  
not the cold distance of space, but  
the offering of water, each drop of rain,

each rivulet, each pulse, each vein.

O second moon, we, too, are made  
of water, of vast and beckoning seas.

We, too, are made of wonders, of great  
and ordinary loves, of small invisible worlds,  
of a need to call out through the dark.

**James Shaheen:** Thank you. You write that we are creatures of constant awe. So I wonder how poetry can inspire that awe, because, in fact, that's what that poem seems, in part at least, designed to do.

**Ada Limón:** Yeah, I think that poetry can open us up to a remembering, a remembering of awe, a remembering of our curiosity. We all have it. We've just forgotten it, and so poetry is a way of remembering that at one point, the world fascinated us, and the world hasn't changed. We just have to keep being fascinated by it.

**James Shaheen:** Ada, thanks so much for joining us. Anything else you'd like to add?

**Ada Limón:** No, it's such a pleasure to talk to you. And one of the things that I'm very excited about is that poem has been turned into a children's book and it's illustrated by the amazing illustrator or an artist named Peter Sís. I just received the galleys recently, and it's just remarkable. So I'm very excited that that poem will not just reach into outer space, but it will hopefully really reach young people in a new way. So I'm very excited about that as well.

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**James Shaheen:** Well, I hope you send those galleys our way. Ada Limón, thanks so much for joining us. It's been a great pleasure. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *You Are Here*, available now. Thanks again, Ada.

**Ada Limón:** Thank you.

**James Shaheen:** You've been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Ada Limón. Tricycle is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to making Buddhist teachings and practices broadly available, and we are pleased to offer our podcasts freely. If you would like to support the podcast, please consider subscribing to Tricycle or making a donation at [tricycle.org/donate](https://tricycle.org/donate). 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!