

The Quotable Milton Friedman

By Bob Chitester

During my speech I will be reading some of these poems. All were part of my 32 years of intellectually stimulating and loving friendship and collaboration with the Friedmans.

I have been interested in and a few times tried my hand at writing poetry, since 1984 in high school.

1957-9, as an undergraduate at the University of Michigan, I took several courses, including one focused on poetry, on the art of Oral Interpretation of literature. In 1962 during graduate school at the University, I took a course in poetry and in writing poetry.

Since then I have read poetry to others on many different occasions in many different settings, including business dinners.

January 14, 1977, at an apartment on the northeast corner of Jones and California streets in San Francisco I met Milton and Rose Friedman for the first time. That evening I read the following two poems to the Friedmans, hoping to expand their understanding of "who" I was. At the time I was the President of a public TV station, which I had founded.

The first reflects on the meaning of life, an interest we all share.

Traveling Through Dark **By William Stafford**

Traveling through the dark I found a deer
dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.
It is usually best to roll them into the canyon:
That road is narrow; to swerve might make more dead.

By glow of the tail-light I stumbled back of the car
And stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing;
She had stiffened already, almost cold.
I dragged her off; she was large in the belly.

My fingers touching her side brought me the reason her side was
warm; her fawn lay there waiting,
alive, still, never to be born.
Beside that mountain road I hesitated.

The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights;
Under the hood purred the steady engine.
I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red;
Around our group I could hear the wilderness listen.

I thought hard for us all – my only swerving –
Then pushed her over the edge into the river.



The second I read that evening is also about a universal value, the role of choices in our lives. The powerful role they play in determining who we are and what we accomplish.

Hay for the Horses
By Gary Snyder

He had driven half the night
From far down San Joaquin
Through Mariposa, up the
Dangerous mountain roads,
And pulled in at eight a.m.
With his big truckload of hay
 behind the barn

With winch and ropes and hooks
We stacked the bales up clean
To splintery redwood rafters
High in the dark, flecks of alfalfa
Whirling through shingle-cracks of light,
Itch of haydust in the
 sweaty shirt and shoes.

At lunchtime under Black oak
Out in the hot corral,
-The old mare nosing lunchpails,
Grasshoppers crackling in the weeds-

“I’m sixty-eight,” he said,
“I first bucked hay when I was seventeen.
I thought, that day I started,
I sure would hate to do this all my life.
And dammit, that’s just what
I’ve gone and done.”



In February 1977, the Friedman’s agreed to proceed with the creation of a TV series, which became “Free To Choose.” In the fall of 1977, Milton came to Erie at my request, to speak to Rotary Club and help me show my Board of Directors and the local community, the project was moving forward. I had the pleasure of introducing Milton and in doing so emphasized his curiosity by reading the following poem.

Overland to the Islands
By Denise Levertov

Let’s go – much as that dog goes,
intently haphazard.
The Mexican light on a day that
‘smells like autumn in Connecticut’
makes iris ripples on his black gleaming fur
– and that too is as one would desire –
a radiance consorting with the dance.

Under his feet
rocks and mud, his imagination, sniffing,
engaged in its perceptions - dancing edgeways, there’s nothing the
dog disdains on his way, -
nevertheless he keeps moving,
changing pace and approach but not direction –
‘every step an arrival’.



Milton started his speech by turning to me and saying, “Bob, thanks for that introduction, but I didn’t know you thought of me as a dog.” My heart stopped, then he smiled, the audience laughed and I relaxed.

I often associated Milton with Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken." Not in the context of his work in economics, which was in the mainstream of economic thought. Where Milton stood above all his contemporaries was applying his inventiveness, his curiosity, his creativity to the development of new ways to address critical public policy issues.

The road not taken
By Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day;
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.



When Milton died in November of 2006 I made every effort to help Rose endure her grief. She lived almost three more years, dying in August 2009. At Memorial Services for her at Hoover Institution and the University of Stanford, I reflected on her life and shared the following poem to emphasize how much she missed Milton in those final years.

For Sale
By Robert Lowell

Poor sheepish plaything,
organized with prodigal animosity,
lived in just a year -
my Father's cottage at Beverly Farms
was on the market the month he died.
Empty, open intimate,
its town-house furniture
had an on tiptoe air
of waiting for the mover
on the heels of the undertaker.
Ready, afraid
of living alone till eighty,
Mother mooned in a window,
as if she had stayed on a train
one stop past her destination.



Milton helped all of us understand freedom, economics, politicians and ourselves, through his concise and witty quotations, squeezing new meaning from common phrases. This poem illustrates the power of words to convey far more than any picture.

A Box of Pastels
By Ted Kooser

I once held on my knees a simple wooden box
in which a rainbow lay dusty and broken.
It was a set of pastels that had years before
belonged to the painter Mary Cassatt,
and all of the colors she'd used in her work
lay open before me. Those hues she'd most used,
the peaches and pinks, were worn down to the stubs,
while the cool colors –violet , ultramarine –
had been set, scarcely touched, to one side.
She'd had little patience with darkness, and her heart
held only a measure of shadow. I touched
the warm dust of those colors, her tools,
and left there with light on the tips of my fingers.



I've been giving speeches on college campuses and elsewhere on various subjects. Always I emphasize two points; economics is simply about choices. Who gets to choose and the value of having many items or ideas to choose from. This poem takes us back to universal values. In this case the recognition that choices need to be carefully considered and we should learn not to look back, to have a healthy acceptance of what was, and an optimistic approach to the future.

Summer Storm
By Dana Gioia

We stood on the rented patio
While the party went on inside.
You knew the groom from college.
I was a friend of the bride.

We hugged the brownstone wall
behind us
To keep our dress clothes dry
And watched the sudden summer
storm
Floodlit against the sky.

The rain was like a waterfall
Of brilliant beaded light,
Cool and silent as the stars
The storm hid from the night.

To my surprise, you took my arm –
A gesture you didn't explain –
And we spoke in whispers, as if we
two
Might imitate the rain.

Then suddenly the storm receded
As swiftly as it came.

The doors behind us opened up.
The hostess called your name.

I watched you merge into the
group,
Aloof and yet polite.
We didn't speak another word
Except to say goodnight.

Why does that evening's memory
Return with this night's storm –
A party twenty years ago,
It's disappointments warm?

There are so many *might have
beens*,
What ifs that won't stay buried,
Other cities, other jobs,
Strangers we might have married.

And memory insists on pining
For places it never went,
As if life would be happier
Just by being different.

Finally I share with you, Milton's favorite poem. It is one I do not read to audiences, because of its length. The basic message is no free society, no kingdom, no empire, no dictator, no tyrant can change the immutable laws of the Copybook Headings. When we let them erode, when our children no longer share them with others and therefore do not make them part of their very being, societies will crumble before the onslaught of those who think things like "sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me," "a penny saved is a penny earned," "the early bird gets the worm", etc. are no longer needed to ensure people live free and prosperous lives.

The Gods of the Copybook Headings
By Rudyard Kipling

AS I PASS through my incarnations in every age and race,
I make my proper prostrations to the Gods of the Market Place.
Peering through reverent fingers I watch them flourish and fall,
And the Gods of the Copybook Headings, I notice, outlast them all.

We were living in trees when they met us. They showed us each in turn
That Water would certainly wet us, as Fire would certainly burn:
But we found them lacking in Uplift, Vision and Breadth of Mind,
So we left them to teach the Gorillas while we followed the March of
Mankind.

We moved as the Spirit listed. They never altered their pace,
Being neither cloud nor wind-borne like the Gods of the Market Place,
But they always caught up with our progress, and presently word would
come
That a tribe had been wiped off its icefield, or the lights had gone out in
Rome.

With the Hopes that our World is built on they were utterly out of touch,
They denied that the Moon was Stilton; they denied she was even Dutch;
They denied that Wishes were Horses; they denied that a Pig had Wings;
So we worshipped the Gods of the Market Who promised these beautiful
things.

When the Cambrian measures were forming, They promised perpetual
peace.
They swore, if we gave them our weapons, that the wars of the tribes
would cease.
But when we disarmed They sold us and delivered us bound to our foe,

The Quotable Milton Friedman

And the Gods of the Copybook Headings said: "Stick to the Devil you know."

On the first Feminian Sandstones we were promised the Fuller Life
(Which started by loving our neighbour and ended by loving his wife)
Till our women had no more children and the men lost reason and faith,
And the Gods of the Copybook Headings said: "The Wages of Sin is Death."

In the Carboniferous Epoch we were promised abundance for all,
By robbing selected Peter to pay for collective Paul;
But, though we had plenty of money, there was nothing our money could buy,
And the Gods of the Copybook Headings said: "If you don't work you die."

Then the Gods of the Market tumbled, and their smooth-tongued wizards withdrew
And the hearts of the meanest were humbled and began to believe it was true
That All is not Gold that Glitters, and Two and Two make Four
And the Gods of the Copybook Headings limped up to explain it once more.

As it will be in the future, it was at the birth of Man
There are only four things certain since Social Progress began.
That the Dog returns to his Vomit and the Sow returns to her Mire,
And the burnt Fool's bandaged finger goes wabbling back to the Fire;

And that after this is accomplished, and the brave new world begins
When all men are paid for existing and no man must pay for his sins,
As surely as Water will wet us, as surely as Fire will burn,
The Gods of the Copybook Headings with terror and slaughter return!

