

Of Gratitude and Sharing: Joy Harjo, U.S. Poet Laureate

By Barbara Ellen Sorensen



Amid so much negativity and despairing world news, there truly is a voice of love and hope that resonates and inspires. That voice belongs to Joy Harjo. The first Native American to take on the mantle of U.S. Poet Laureate, Harjo embodies grace and wisdom and perhaps offers a much-needed panacea that our country seeks.

Harjo was born in 1951, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the eldest of four children. Harjo's father was Muscogee Creek, her mother Cherokee, French, and Irish. A member of the Mvskoke Nation, her path to poetry

was never linear. If art is life, then she found life in all forms of art. As a young woman, Harjo engaged in visual art, drama, and dance. In addition to poetry, she has written screenplays, stage plays, memoirs, and collections of prose interviews. She has dabbled in filmmaking and performs on the alto sax and traditional flute. Her published works include nine books of poetry, five albums of original music, and two children's books.

A SENSE OF BELONGING

Joy Harjo began her academic journey at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1967-1968. "When I attended, the IAIA was a Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) school with mostly high school students and a two-year, post-graduate program," she explains. What made IAIA unique from other BIA schools was that the curriculum was art-based. Indeed, Harjo was accepted into the program because of her drawings. "Our arts' instructors were working, ground-breaking Indian artists," Harjo says, "and included Allan Houser, Fritz Scholder, Otellie Loloma, and Josephine Wapp."

Besides employing a predominantly Native staff and instructors, IAIA hosted students from tribal nations across the country. This was something that Harjo had never experienced before. "For the first time in all my years of education, which had been in public schools in Tulsa, I felt like I belonged," Harjo says. Being a student at IAIA informed her about other tribal peoples, their arts and cultures. Harjo remembers that the students were able to visit pueblos and attend tribal dances.

In 1976, Harjo completed her undergraduate degree at the University of New Mexico and went on to earn an MFA in creative writing at the University of Iowa. However, Harjo's life would eventually circle back to IAIA, accentuating how important tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) really are to Native students. From 1978 to 1979, and then again from 1983 to 1984, Harjo taught at IAIA. "Teaching at a TCU is giving back to the community, to those who are coming up, to be an

inspiration and a tool for navigating change," she observes. For Harjo, there is always change. And even as the 21st century continues to unfold with harrowing events, TCUs are still viable and relevant, perhaps now more than ever. "Tribal colleges make obtaining a college degree more accessible for Native students," Harjo adds. "They are closer to home and the curriculum is more tailored to the particular tribal groups in the area. They're especially helpful to those who have jobs and other family commitments."

THE PURPOSES OF ARTISTIC EXPRESSION AND ACCOLADES

Indigenous people have always used art in its myriad forms. Finding ways to express oneself is a part of everyday life. "Our arts carry the spirit of our people," Harjo explains. "From ancestral presence and knowledge to the future knowledge carried by the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. We turn to the arts to express what is within us that we don't always have words or other means to communicate." However, Harjo is adamant that "we do not all need to be artists; we can all express creatively."

Over her lifetime of playing music, singing, writing, and performing poetry, Harjo has been honored with numerous awards and has been the recipient of many prizes. Some of those awards include the prestigious 2017 Ruth Lily Poetry Prize, which recognizes lifetime achievement. In 2019, she was elected as a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets and named the United States Poet Laureate. Harjo is also the director of For Girls Becoming, which is an art mentorship program for young Mvskoke women.

Two of her most famous books are *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* (1994), winner of the Oklahoma Center for the Book Award for Poetry, and her memoir, *Crazy Brave* (2012), which won the 2013 PEN Center USA literary award for creative nonfiction. She often intersperses her poetry readings with singing or traditional flute and saxophone playing. In 2009, Harjo won a Native American Music Award for best female artist of the year and has received awards and nominations from the American Indian Film Festival and the New Mexico Music Awards, among others.

INSPIRATION AND SHARING

The survival and sharing of tribal values and worldviews are at the heart of Joy Harjo's artistic expressions. Art is the necessary link between oneself and humanity. "I always consider the source of my art," she says. "I am inspired by trees. Then I study and listen to them." For Harjo, everything in nature holds wisdom

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and guidance. "[Trees] are teachers. Or stones, or sky elements, or each other."

Perhaps the best way to explicate Joy Harjo's belief in the connectedness of all entities is to cull through the poems where she has expressed this so elegantly. In *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*, there is the poem, "Reconciliation, A Prayer," in which Harjo offers a memorial to African American poet, Audre Lorde, who died in 1993. In an uncanny and preternatural way that seems to underscore what is currently transpiring, Harjo appeals to the elements:

*Oh sun, moon, stars, our other relatives / peering at us
from the inside / of god's house walk with us as we climb
/ into the next century / naked but for the stories we have
of each / other. Keep us from giving / up in this land of
nightmares which is / also the land of miracles. / We sing
our song which we've been / promised has no beginning or
/ end.*

Then, Harjo writes a single, shattering line:

All acts of kindness are lights in the war for justice.

These plain and straight-forward words take on a deep gravity. Harjo reminds us that "when you look to the heart, to the deep root, you wind up back at the original teachings that taught us about respect. Poetry, music, and art have their roots in the ancestral realm, in the spiritual realms. It is important to express gratitude by sharing, and by teaching those who are coming up."

Looking back, Joy Harjo credits IAIA as embodying the spirit of teaching and learning. And the institute continues to provide a sense of family. "I am still closely associated there," she says, "I am still involved with students whom I taught nearly 50 years ago. What a gift to be part of their lives as they've developed artistically, as individuals and community members." ▲

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