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联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

Message from the Director-General of UNESCO

Audrey Azoulay,

on the occasion of World Poetry Day

21 March 2018

Dreams

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.
Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.

Langston Hughes

These lines by the poet Langston Hughes are an invitation to a dream, an escape, an emancipation. Poetry is undoubtedly the best form for expressing this yearning, since it touches upon the personal and allows for all freedoms.

This poem is about the extraordinary power of words that open up infinite horizons, enhance our lives, change reality, embellish it, show it in a new light which has never been seen before.

Poetry is not a trivial game of sounds, words and images: it has a creative, transformative power.

Poet, writer, playwright and leader of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, Langston Hughes placed his art at the service of the fight against the discrimination suffered by the African American community. His poetry is thus inseparable from his commitment to civil rights and it remains a source of inspiration for all the advocates of fundamental freedoms around the world.

Poetry is also this unique art that makes us aware of extraordinary human diversity: the diversity of languages and cultures. It is a meeting place between the individual and the world. It is an introduction to difference, dialogue and peace. It is testimony to the universality of the human condition beyond the innumerable means used to describe it.

Each year since 1999, UNESCO has celebrated World Poetry Day on 21 March. It is an occasion to celebrate the wealth of the world's cultural and linguistic heritage. It is also an occasion to draw attention to traditional forms of poetry that are in danger of disappearing, as is the case for many lesser-used and minority languages. To maintain living traditions, UNESCO has included a number of poetic forms in the intangible heritage of humanity: for example the poetic art of Ca trù singing from Viet Nam, Al'azi from the United Arab Emirates, Baul songs from Bangladesh and the oral heritage of Gelede shared by the Yoruba-Nago community living in Togo, Benin and Nigeria.

Poetry is not limited to the artistic aspect: it is also a tool for formal and informal education. In this sense, the arts and cultural practices provide effective support for lifelong learning. This is why UNESCO encourages and supports artistic education since it strengthens intellectual, emotional and psychological development, shaping generations that are more well-rounded and capable of reinventing the world.

This day is also the occasion to pay tribute to all the people who bring this prominent art to life: the poets of course, but also the translators, publishers and the organizers of poetry readings and poetry festivals. UNESCO encourages all Member States to support in their actions all those who work every day so that poetry may continue to enrich our lives.

Finally, since poetry is an act of creating and sharing, UNESCO invites everyone, on this World Day, to create, invent, share, and be open to other languages and other ways of naming the world, to rejoice in all that is different in our diversity. Since to cultivate art and cultivate the mind is also to cultivate peace.